



EIGHT PERSPECTIVES ON CHANUKA

Yosef's Chanukah Candles in Mitzrayim

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Yosef lit Chanukah candles in Mitzrayim.

You have likely never heard that before because there is no such statement in Chazal. And yet, there is a truth to it.

The Torah (Bereishis 39:2) tells us:

וַיְהִי ה' אִתּוֹ יוֹסֵף וַיְהִי אִישׁ מְצַלִּיחַ וַיְהִי בְּבֵית אֲדֹנָיו הַמִּצְרָיִם.

Hashem was with Yosef, and he was a successful man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian.

The very next pasuk tells us:

וַיֵּרָא אֲדֹנָיו כִּי ה' אִתּוֹ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר הוּא עֹשֶׂה ה' מְצַלִּיחַ בְּיָדוֹ.

And his master saw that Hashem was with him and all that he did, Hashem

allowed to succeed in his hand.

What does the second pasuk add that we didn't already know from the first? The first pasuk informs us that Hashem was with him, and Yosef was successful. The second pasuk only adds that Yosef's Egyptian master saw this.

What exactly did his master see? Instead of the Torah writing that he saw Yosef's success, it relates that he saw that Hashem was with him.

I have three questions:

1) What does it mean that Hashem is with someone? It is unlikely that this Egyptian had achieved such a high spiritual level that he saw the Shechinah resting on Yosef. He did not see the presence of Hashem; all he saw was that Yosef enjoyed success. Why doesn't the Torah simply say that the Egyptian master saw Yosef's success? — "His master saw that Hashem allowed Yosef to be successful." וַיֵּרָא אֲדֹנָיו שֶׁה' הַצְלִיחַ בְּיָדוֹ.

2) How did he "see" it? One can believe or perhaps even know that an individual's success is due to Divine influence, but one does not actually see it.

3) Why would an Egyptian attribute the success of Yosef to Hashem and not one of the Egyptian gods?

Rashi writes:

כי ה' אתו. שם שמים שגור בפיו:

That Hashem was with him — the name of Hashem was fluent in his mouth.

With these few words, Rashi answers all three questions. Yosef was so successful in verbally acknowledging and attributing all of his success to Hashem that despite being a seasoned idolator, his Egyptian master became convinced that Hashem was the cause of all of Yosef's success.

All of those acknowledgements and attributions were Yosef's Chanukah candles in Mitzrayim.

How so?

Probably the most unusual element of the mitzvah to light Chanukah candles is the expenditure required to assure its fulfillment.

According to the *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chaim* 671:1), even a destitute individual must purchase wicks and oil, even if that means selling his clothing for cash. This stands in stark contrast to the comment of the Rama elsewhere (*Orach Chaim* 651) that we need not spend more than a fifth of our available funds to fulfill a mitzvah from the Torah. Since lighting Chanukah candles is a rabbinic institution, why would we be obligated to spend more money to assure its fulfillment than on a mitzvah from the Torah?

The source for this halachah is the Rambam (*Chanukah* 4:12) who writes:

מצות נר חנוכה מצוה חביבה היא עד מאד וצריך אדם להזהר בה כדי להודיע הנס ולהוסיף בשבח הא-ל והודיה לו על הנסים שעשה לנו, אפילו אין לו מה יאכל אלא מן הצדקה שואל או מוכר כסותו ולוקח שמן ונרות ומדליק.

The mitzvah of Chanukah lights is a very precious one, and one must be cautious regarding it in order to publicize the miracle and to increase the praise of the Lord and gratitude towards Him for the miracles that He did for us. Even one with nothing to eat other than from charity must beg or sell his clothing and procure oil and wicks to light.

The reason Chanukah candles are so precious and their fulfillment is so critical is due to *pirsumei nisa* — they publicize the miracle. They declare that Hakadosh Baruch Hu performs miracles for the Jewish People. Facilitating that declaration is more important than facilitating the fulfillment of a positive commandment from the Torah. The

acknowledgement, appreciation, and expression of Hakadosh Baruch Hu's involvement in the world in general and with Klal Yisroel in particular, is more fundamental, its declaration more critical, than the fulfillment of positive mitzvos.

We find this idea expressed in the Torah itself when Eliezer, the servant of Avraham, asks for and receives a miracle from Hashem to determine the proper wife for Yitzchok. After the entire story is presented as a narrative, the Torah repeats it as part of the conversation that Eliezer has with Lavan and Besuel. What is Hakadosh Baruch Hu teaching us by repeating the whole story?

Rashi (*Bereishis* 24:42) quotes from the Midrash:

אמר רבי אַחָא יָפָה שִׁחָתָן שֶׁל עֲבָדֵי אַבוֹת לְפָנֵי הַמָּקוֹם מִתּוֹרָתוֹן שֶׁל בְּנֵים, שְׁהָרִי פֶרֶשָׁה שֶׁל אֱלִיעֶזֶר כְּפוּלָה בְּתוֹרָה וְהִרְבָּה גּוֹפֵי תוֹרָה לֹא נִתְּנוּ אֵלָּא בְּרַמְיָהּ

Rabbi Acha said, more precious are the conversations of the servants of the Avos than the Torah of their descendants. The section of Eliezer is doubled in the Torah, but much of the principles of the Torah were only presented with hints.

What is so precious about the conversation between Eliezer and Besuel?

The answer is that their conversation resulted in the acknowledgment and appreciation of the miraculous involvement of Hakadosh Baruch Hu in the connection between Rivkah and Yitzchok. The result of that conversation was that even Lavan and Besuel were forced to admit that *me-Hashem yatza hadavar*; it was an act of God (*Bereishis* 24:50). It was a conversation rich with *pirsumei nisa*.

The purpose of lighting Chanukah candles is *pirsumei nisa*, the

acknowledgement, appreciation, and expression that Hakadosh Baruch Hu is constantly performing miracles for Bnei Yisroel.

When Yosef behaved in a manner that made it clear to all that his success was only because of Hakadosh Baruch Hu, it was a type of *pirsumei nisa*. It was because of that *pirsumei nisa* that his master “saw” that Hashem, not an Egyptian deity, was “with him.”

That is how Yosef lit Chanukah candles in Mitzrayim, and it is in this way that we should all light Chanukah candles every day.

The Anatomy of a Miracle: The Chemistry of Combustion and Chanukah

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Many *divrei Torah* on Chanukah address the popular question: What are we commemorating on Chanukah? The victory in battle against Hellenistic oppression, or the miracle of the extended burning of the oil in the Menorah? According to the Gemara (*Shabbat* 21b), the essence of Chanukah is the miraculous combustion of the one small remaining sealed cruse of pure oil that burned in the Menorah for an additional seven days, eight days in total. From the next year forward, these days were instituted by the sages as a holiday with recitation of Hallel and special thanksgiving in prayers and blessings:

נעשה בו נס והדליקו ממנו שמונה ימים. לשנה אחרת קבעום ועשאוּם ימים טובים בהלל

A miracle occurred and they lit from it for eight days. In a later year, they established these days as a holiday of praise and thanksgiving.

Shabbat 21b

The Rambam is uncharacteristically effusive in describing the mitzvah of *ner Chanukah*:

מצות נר חנוכה מצוה חביבה היא עד מאד וצריך אדם להזהר בה כדי להודיע הנס ולהוסיף בשבח הא-ל והודיה לו על הנסים שעשה לנו. אפילו אין לו מה יאכל אלא מן הצדקה שואל או מוכר כסותו ולוקח שמן ונרות ומדליק:

The mitzvah of lighting Chanukah lights is a very precious mitzvah. A person must be meticulous about it in order to publicize the miracles and increase praise to Hashem and thanks to Him for the miracles that He performed for us. Even if one requires charity for sustenance, one must borrow money or sell one's clothing in order to purchase oil or candles to light.

Rambam, Hilchos Chanukah 4:12

The Rambam explains that the procuring of oil or candles for lighting the Menorah obligates a person to sell his clothing to enable the purchase. This is the only mitzvah in the Torah that the Rambam describes in such a manner.

It is interesting to note this extreme emphasis on the miraculous burning by briefly exploring combustion in the Torah.

1. Creation:

ויקרא אלקים לרקיע שמים ויהי ערב ויהי בקר יום שני.
God called the expanse Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day.

Bereishit 1:8

Rashi notes that the term שמים is a

contraction of word pairs. — שא מים — carry water, שם מים — water is there, and אש ומים — fire and water that He mixed together. This would be the first mention of fire in the Torah (though not directly in the text). Heaven is composed of a miraculous mixture of opposing forces.

2. Kayin and Hevel: The next narrative of fire comes with the offerings of Kayin and Hevel. When the Torah (Bereishit 4:4) states that Hashem turned to the offering of Hevel, Rashi explains that a heavenly fire descended, which showed acceptance of the offering of Hevel.

3. Avram and the Fiery Furnace

וימת הרן על פני תרה אביו בארץ מולדתו באור כשדים.

Haran died in the lifetime of his father Terah, in his native land, Ur Kasdim.

Bereishit 11:28

Why is this place called “Ur Kasdim,” (*ur* connoting fire)? Rashi describes the narrative of Nimrod casting Avram into the fiery furnace and his salvation, followed by his brother Haran’s demise.

As in all the above examples, the miraculous nature of these combustions is alluded to in the text of the Torah and only explicitly described by Rashi.

4. Moshe and the Burning Bush

וירא מלאך ה' אליו בלבת אש מתוך הסנה וירא והנה הסנה בער באש והסנה איננו אכל.
An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed.

Shemot 3:2

The wonder that Moshe observed was combustion without consumption. The nature of fire is to provide heat and light but also to consume and

utterly destroy. Any alteration of the natural laws can be considered miraculous.

If we view fire as a combination of energy and matter, we understand that the potential energy of the fuel source is converted into heat and light as the matter undergoes a chemical reaction.

Teva, the Hebrew word for nature, comes from the same root as *matbei'a*, coin. Just as a coin is cast with the impression of an image, Hashem casts his impression and we call that nature. He hides His hand in the physical world, but we are the recipients of *nisecha sheb'chol yom* — Your miracles each day.

On a spiritual level, the lack of consumption common to both Ur Kasdim and the Burning Bush do not deviate from G-d’s natural laws. The energy, heat, and light were present, but the combustion is absent since Avram and the spirit of Hashem had no elements of physical matter to consume (contrast this to Haran’s immediate demise.)

Returning to our initial question of commemoration on Chanukah: victory in battle vs. miraculous Menorah, we turn to the Maharal:

י"ל שעיקר מה שקבעו ימי חנוכה בשביל מה שנצחו את היונים. רק שלא היה נראה שהי' נצחון ע"י נס הש"י שעשה זה ולא מכחם וגבורתם. ולפיכך נעשה הנס ע"י נרות המנורה שידעו שהכל היה בנס המלחמה ג"כ.

It seems that the real reason why they established an eight-day holiday was to celebrate the victory over the Greeks. However, it wasn't abundantly clear that the victory was the result of a miracle from G-d rather than their own might and courage. Therefore, a miracle was performed through the lights of the Menorah so that everyone should know that everything was a miracle, including

the war.

The Maharal explains that while we are commemorating the victorious battle and the miracle of the oil, the emphasis on the Menorah is to ensure for posterity that there will be a recognition that the military victory and the extended combustion are equally miraculous.

Historically, the time period of the Chanukah story is a small bubble of victory from oppression that then cascades into the Roman conquer and the destruction of the temple. In the prayer *Al Hanisim* we use an interesting form of language:

שעשה נסים לאבותינו בימים ההם בזמן הזה.
This can be translated as: “Who wrought miracles for our forefathers, in those days at this season.” An alternative translation can give us a more contemporary application: “Who wrought miracles in those days and presently in this time.”

“There are two ways to live: you can live as if nothing is a miracle; you can live as if everything is a miracle.” This quote is commonly attributed to Albert Einstein.

Whether verifiable or not, the point is valid. The Rambam’s emphasis on the importance of the Menorah lights is now understandable. The mitzvah of lighting Chanukah lights is a very precious mitzvah. We need to emphasize the energy and the spiritual; the heat and the light of the miracle, even if it means giving up the physical: food and clothing. That was truly the essence and victory of Chanukah.

Chanukah is the last holiday commemorated by the sages. It occurred in a brief moment of success before our ultimate *galut*. It falls during the darkest part of the winter.

We could be despondent over the personal battles we wage on a daily basis. Instead, we have been graciously armed with Hashem’s eternal reminder in the form of the Menorah flames. The Menorah reminds us that we are equipped with incredible potential and energy, which can illuminate and glow in scope beyond our comprehension.

Developed from a shiur given by Rabbi Meir Goldwicht, Rosh Yeshiva, RIETS

The Eternal Jew

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The Rambam in the opening halacha of the third chapter in *Hilchos Chanukah* states:

בבית שני כשמלכו יון גזרו גזירות על ישראל ולא הניחו אותם לעסוק בתורה ומצות ופשטו ידם בממונם ובנותיהם ונכנסו להיכל ופרצו פרצות וטמאו הטהרות וצר להם לישראל מאד מפניהם, ולחצום לחץ גדול. עד שריחם עליהם אלהי אבותינו, והושיעם מידם והצילם.

During the time of the second Bais Hamikdash when the Greek kings were in power, they issued decrees against Israel preventing them from learning Torah and performing mitzvos. The kings laid their hands on their wealth and their daughters then entered the Heichal, defiling all that were pure. The Jewish people were greatly oppressed by them. Ultimately, Hashem took pity upon them and saved them from their tormentors.

The Rambam’s explanation seems difficult to understand. It appears that the Rambam equates the theft of our money by the Greeks to the far more serious suppression of our religion. This seems to play into the anti-

Semitic falsehoods fostered by our enemies about alleged Jewish greed.

Another question: is the Rambam ignoring the possibility that the true intention of the Greeks was even more sinister even than depriving us of our religious freedom? Did they intend to wipe out the Jewish people? Were they no different than Pharaoh or Haman? Or were the Greeks content with Jewish survival as long as the Jews did not practice their religion?

Rabbi Avrohom Weinfeld, in *Even Yisrael*, suggests that the the Greeks indeed intended to annihilate the Jewish people. However, the Greeks were worried that if they made their true intentions known, the Jewish people would retaliate and ultimately wage war. He writes:

שכוונת מלכות יון היה להתחיל רק במלחמת הדת היה כי יראו להתחיל במלחמה גלויה נגד ישראל להשמיד ולהרוג אותם כמו שהיה באמת רצונם, שאולי ילכו ישראל במלחמה נגדם כי ירגישו בגודל הסכנה ויאמרו הבא להרגך השכם והרגו וילחמו בהם ויצטרכו לעלות מן הארץ הישראלית, לכן עלה בדעתם אופן אחר איך ללחום עם ישראל היינו במלחמת הדת, ובוזה סברו שלא ילכו במלחמה נגדם כי לא ירגישו כולם בסכנה.

The Greeks brought spiritual persecution because they feared that fighting an overt battle against the Jewish people in order to destroy them — which was their true intention — might cause the Jewish people to fight back because they would realize the great danger and say, “if someone comes to kill you, kill him first ...” Therefore, the Greeks came up with a different strategy to fight the Jewish people — through a religious war. They thought that the Jewish people would not fight back because they wouldn’t realize the magnitude of the danger.

Now we can understand why the Rambam emphasizes theft as

much as spiritual persecution. The Rambam understood that the Greeks were no different than all of our past and future enemies, whose intentions were and will be to eradicate us. He therefore added in his halacha the physical aggression perpetrated against the Jewish people, which was expressed by taking our money and our daughters. The Greeks wanted us to think they could tolerate Jews in the world and they only objected to us practicing our religion. However, their true motivation and intention was to eradicate not only our Torah, but to annihilate the Jewish people entirely.

This approach begs the question, how did the Rambam know that their true intention was to eradicate us and not necessarily to prevent us from learning Torah? Unlike Purim, there was no edict that was sent out with the signet of the king proclaiming the Jewish people should be killed on such and such date. The answer is that the Greeks and all the Gentile nations knew that when the Jewish people were given the Torah at Har Sinai, there was an eternal bond between Hashem, Klal Yisrael, and the Torah. As the *Zohar* (Acharei Mos 73a) states: Hakadosh Baruch Hu, the Torah, and the Jewish people are all interconnected. Once the Jewish people proclaimed at Har Sinai, “*na’aseh v’nishma*” — we will do and we will listen — we forever forged a bond with Hashem. Rabbi Dovid Cohen in his *Yemei Chanukah* writes:

דיסוד נתינת התורה לישראל, הוא החיבור של ישראל ואורייתא וקובה שהם חד, שהתורה היא חלק אלוך ממעל, וישראל בשורש נשמתם הם חלק אלוך ממעל, ועל ידי נתינת

התורה לישראל, הם נעשים דבוקים בנותן התורה.

The foundation of the giving of the Torah to the Jewish people is the interconnection of the Jewish people, the Torah, and Holy One Blessed Be He. The Torah is a portion of Hashem and a piece of Hashem is a part of every Jew. Once the Jewish people received the Torah we became a part of the One who gave the Torah.

The Greeks and all the other nations knew intuitively that they were incapable of taking away our Torah or our mitzvos because they are as eternal as Hashem. Just as they knew that they can’t rid the world of Hashem, they also realized they can’t rid Klal Yisrael of their connection to Torah. Therefore, when they targeted the Jewish people, it must have been with an intent to destroy them physically. This is how the Rambam knew the true motivations of the Greeks and that they were disguising their true intentions of physical annihilation behind spiritual persecution.

Sukkos and Chanukah: The Unbreakable Bond With Hashem

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There are many sources that point to a connection between Chanukah and Sukkos. After reviewing this correlation, we will discuss its significance.¹

1) The Midrash² relates that the Greeks wished to uproot both the

mitzvah of lighting the Menorah as well as the eight days of Sukkos, and Hashem responded by granting Klal Yisrael victory and the celebration of the eight days of Chanukah.

2) The Gemara (*Shabbos* 21b) records the dispute between Bais Hillel and Bais Shamai as to whether we should light one candle on the first day of Chanukah and then add a candle each successive day, or whether we should start with eight candles and subtract a candle on each subsequent day. One of the reasons ascribed to Bais Shamai, who advocates for diminishing numbers of candles, is that the 70 bulls sacrificed over the course of Sukkos decreased in number each day, from 13 on the first day to seven on the seventh day.

3) Both the *Rokeach* (*Hilchos Chanukah Siman* 225) and the *Baal Ha’turim* (*Vayikrah* 24:2) suggest that the Torah introduces the obligation of lighting the Menorah immediately after the discussion of Sukkos to draw a parallel between Sukkos and Chanukah. The *Baal Ha’turim* references that Hallel is said on the eight days of Chanukah just as it is said on the eight days of Sukkos (including Shemini Atzeres). The *Rokeach* highlights the corresponding number of days of Sukkos and Chanukah, and notes that the mention of pure olive oil for the Menorah hints to its preferred use on Chanukah, and adds that the respective terms *ner* and *neros* related to the Menorah allude to the halachah that one candle is lit the first night and additional *neros* are added subsequent nights.

4) In the second perek of Sefer Chagai, the *navi* prophesies that Hashem will “shake the heavens and the earth,” and Rashi interprets this as referring to the miracles that will

occur at the time of Chanukah. The passage begins by identifying the exact time of this *nevu'ah* as the twenty-first day of the seventh month — which is the seventh day of Sukkos, Hoshanah Rabbah.

5) The *Tur* (O.C. *Siman* 417) asserts that the three *regalim* correspond to the *Avos*: Pesach is linked with Avraham, Shavuot is associated with Yitzchak, and Sukkos is connected to Yaakov. The source for the correlation to Yaakov is the *pasuk* (*Bereishis* 33:17) וַיַּעֲקֹב נָסַע סִבְתָּהּ וַיֵּבֶן לוֹ בַּיִת וַלְמִקְנָהּוּ עָשָׂה סִבֹּת עַל פֶּן קָרָא שֵׁם הַמָּקוֹם סִבֹּת, depicting how Yaakov built Sukkos and called a place by this name. Some commentaries also discerned an allusion to Chanukah in the words וַיֵּבֶן לוֹ בַּיִת, for the word לוֹ has the numerical value of 36, the number of *neros Chanukah* that we must light in our *bayis*.³ Thus, the same *pasuk* hints at both Sukkos and Chanukah.

What is the association between Chanukah and Sukkos?

The Vilna Gaon⁴ offers a remarkable insight into an element of Sukkos. He asserts that the *cheit ha'eigel* constituted a grievous violation of Hashem's trust and consequently Klal Yisrael forfeited the *ananei hakavod*, which represented the special covenant between them and Hashem. Following the shattering of the first *Luchos* there was a long period of appeasement and repentance, with the atonement culminating on Yom Kippur, when the second *Luchos* were granted. The Vilna Gaon argues that a careful reading of the *pesukim* at the end of Sefer Shemos reveals that on the day after Yom Kippur, Moshe gathered the people and instructed them to commence preparation for the construction of the Mishkan,

through which the Shechina would continuously rest amidst Klal Yisrael. After gathering materials and commissioning the artisans, the actual construction of the Mishkan began on the fifteenth of Tishrei. On that very day the *ananei hakavod* returned, representing a full restoration of the relationship between Hashem and Klal Yisrael.

The Vilna Gaon's illuminating interpretation provides some context for another idea relating to Sukkos, presented by the *Netziv* and others.⁵ They note that the Midrash depicts the holding and waving of the *daled minim* as a symbol of spiritual triumph of Bnei Yisrael over the *umos ha'olam*, the nations of the world. Each year during the Days of Judgement, they explain, the nations of the world contest the right of the Jewish people to maintain their position as the Chosen People, and every year the Heavenly Court decides in favor of Klal Yisrael. The *daled minim* are a symbol of our victory. This narrative can readily be understood as an extension of the Vilna Gaon's perspective: Sukkos is the time when we commemorate and celebrate our special relationship with Hashem, which has withstood the greatest challenges from both within (the *cheit ha'egel*) and without (the *umos ha'olam*).

In this light, the association between Chanukah and Sukkos can be readily understood. The Greeks sought to challenge and negate the idea that the Jewish people have a unique status among the nations of the world. To this end, they especially targeted certain mitzvos, such as Shabbos, Rosh Chodesh, and *bris milah*, which highlight our distinctiveness and our special relationship with Hashem.

King Ptolemy's edict to translate the Torah into Greek also served this purpose, as he perceived that this would grant his people equal access and the ability to claim that the Jews had lost their sole propriety over the Torah. The antipathy of the Greeks to the Bais Hamikdash was rooted in its representing and manifesting our special relationship with Hashem, and therefore they sought to disrupt and compromise the *avodah* in the Bais Hamikdash.

This brings the opening midrash to life. The Greeks sought to dispel the notion that the Jews held a special status, and therefore targeted, at least in concept, the meaning of the yom tov of Sukkos. The message of the *ananei hakavod* associated with Sukkos, symbolizing the unique and unbreakable bond between Hashem and Bnei Yisrael, was an anathema to the Greek ideology. They could not tolerate the idea that, in encountering *hashra'as ha'Shechinah* in the sukkah, a Jewish family could reenact that day when Klal Yisrael began construction of the Mishkan and experienced the restoration of the *ananei hakavod*. With the victory of Chanukah and a newfound appreciation for our special relationship with Hakadosh Baruch Hu, Klal Yisrael instituted the mitzvah of *hadlakas neros Chanukah*, representing the transformation of every home into a Mikdash where the Shechinah continues to reside.⁶

Endnotes

1. Some of the sources and ideas in this article can be found in R. Aryeh Leib Shapira, *Chazon La'moed: Chanukah*, Ch. 18; R. Chanoch Henschel Karelstein, *Kuntres Bi'inyanei Yimei Chanukah*, p. 47ff.

2. אוצר מדרשים (איזונשטיין) חנוכה עמוד 193: וכתוב עליו תן חלק לשבעה וגם לשמונה, תן חלק לשבעה שכל מי שיש לו חלק בשבע נרות שהן מאירות

תמיד בביהמ"ק וגם לשמונה ימי החג אין בריה יכולה להם, עמדו וטמאו כל השמנים שבביהמ"ק ... אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא חשבתם לעקור שבעת הנרות ושמונה ימי החג הנני מביא עליכם שמונה ימים ושבעה בני חשמונאי שמאבדים אתכם מן העולם

3. There are a number of sources that expand on the correspondence between Yaakov and Chanukah. See e.g. *Mi'maamakim al HaTorah, Bereishis, Maamar* 28. Thematically, one might find associations between Yaakov as the *yosheiv ohalim* and the centrality of Torah *She'baal Peh* on Chanukah. As well, Chanukah provides a transition to a post-*nevuah* form of *hashgacha*, and this may be discerned in the *hester panim* that Yaakov experienced as the last of the Avos. Also, as will be discussed later, Yaakov's right to the heritage of his father and grandfather was contested by his brother Esav, and the Greeks also questioned the unique status of the Jewish people.

4. Commentary to Shir HaShirim 1:4.

5. *Ha'amek Davar (Vayikra 16:16,29), Chochmas Shlomo*, O.C. Siman 581.

6. I elaborated on this idea in *Torah To Go, Chanukah* 5773. One might also explore the importance of human endeavor and initiative in *avodas Hashem* as it relates to Sukkos and Chanukah.

When You(r Lights) Fail

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In spite of its rabbinic origins, the details of the mitzvah of lighting Chanuka lights generally point to it being a very serious and important mitzvah. For one, it is labeled as "*pirsume'i nisa*," the publicizing of a miracle, a designation limited to very few mitzvot and carrying with it the responsibility to fundraise or even sell the shirt off one's back to afford its fulfillment.

Additionally, the mitzvah of lighting the Chanuka candles was constructed in a very unique way; the basic requirement of *ner ish uveiso* requires

only one light be lit per household, but better methods of fulfillment were created as well. We may perform *mehadrin*, lighting a candle for each member of the household, or *mehadrin min hamehadrin*, taking into account which night of the Chanukah miracle we are commemorating. The construction of this mitzvah seems to challenge us to eschew the basic performance and instead adopt the most challenging version of the mitzvah, which is commonly performed in all Jewish homes.

While these details seem to indicate a strict posture toward this mitzvah, there is one halacha that seems to defy its gravity. The basic requirement for lighting the Chanukah candles is that the candles have enough fuel to last for a half hour. What if the candle (or candles) goes out before the half hour has passed? The Gemara, *Shabbos* 21a-21b, discusses this question.

While R' Huna holds that it must be relit, both R' Chisda and R' Zeira hold that "*kavs'a ein zakuk la*," that if it is extinguished, it need not be relit. The halacha follows this opinion and while many suggest that we should relight the candles if they go out before the minimum time, it is only an added stringency to do so and not an actual obligation. Rashba (*Responsa* 1:539) adds that even if it did not extinguish on its own, but rather if in an attempt to adjust the flame you mistakenly extinguished it, there is still no obligation to relight the wick.

If this mitzvah really is of such significance and there is a minimum amount of fuel that lighting requires, why would we not be required to actually make use of that fuel? Why would the candles need to be prepared so that they may last for a half hour, but then not be required to relight

them if they falter?

Bnei Yisaschar (Kislev/Teves no. 3) explains that the Chanukah lights need not be relit because they represent Torah's wisdom and its study. He posits that it is this very specific halachic feature that highlights the significant difference that exists between Torah study and the study of all other disciplines. He says that when it comes to Torah, even if we study a topic but are unable to come to a halachic determination or even worse, we come to an incorrect one, our reward is as if the law was determined correctly. Contrast this to other areas of study, where a mistake or an "incomplete" receives no credit.

The lights of Chanukah — and light generally — represents the radiance of Torah. The *pasuk* states:

כִּי נֵר מִצְוָה וְתוֹרָה אֹר וְדָרָךְ חַיִּים תּוֹכְחוֹת מוֹסֵר.

For the commandment is a lamp, the teaching is a light, And the way to life is the rebuke that disciplines.

Mishlei 6:23

Even if our intention and hope is to have the lights last and continue through their required minimum length of time, if they fail, credit is fully provided for this mitzvah.

The Chofetz Chayim popularized this idea in a comment (*Chofetz Chayim Al HaTorah*) on Rashi in Parshas Bechukosai (26:3). Rashi interprets the command of *im bechukosai telechu* (if you follow My commandments) to demand "*shetihyu ameilim BaTorah*" — that we work laboriously on Torah. The Chofetz Chayim explains that the emphasis on the "labor" required for Torah reminds us that unlike other occupations where results are the determining factor in assessing success, when it comes to

Torah study, the rules are different. This, he explains, is the meaning of the expression of gratitude for Torah that we recite at a *siyum* upon the completion of a Torah project:

אָנוּ עִמְלִים וּמְקַבְּלִים שְׂכָר וְהֵם עִמְלִים וְאֵינָם
מְקַבְּלִים שְׂכָר

We toil and receive reward while they toil and do not receive reward.

While all industries might toil equally, the effort expended in Torah study results in reward even if the project goes unfinished or is finished poorly.

This tolerance or even embrace of failure in the process of Torah study is found in other contemporary sources as well. R' Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky (known as the "Steipler Gaon") writes (*Kreina D'igresa* Vol. II pp. 4-5) how an aspiring student of Torah should write down his "*chiddushim*," his innovations and insights. While we might very well imagine that the Steipler's concept of "*chiddushim*" are reserved for those students at the upper echelons of Torah study, he explains:

חידוש נקרא כשנתברר לך פרטי הסוגי' מה שבתחילה טעית וחשבת אחרת, או איזו הסבר לדבר שלא הבנת מתחלה טעמו.

A chiddush is where there was a detail of a topic about which you made a mistake and learned incorrectly (and since figured out) or an explanation for something that you originally did not understand.

The Steipler explains that the process of "*chiddush*" is not about objective intellectual originality, but the process of uncovering what is new to this particular student. "*Chiddush*" does not only refer to those great ideas that no one has ever heard, but also to the ideas that were "new to us," that we only learned due to our first-timer failures and amateurish mistakes.

The menorah sometimes extinguishes even after all our preparation and efforts to light it. That might not be the result we planned, but it is a result we can still feel good about, particularly when there are so many forces that attempt to smother and sabotage our efforts.

R' Aryeh Tzvi Frumer (*Eretz Hatzvi*, Chanukah 5688) applies this lesson to the challenges of *galus* (exile). He writes how the light of the menorah is meant to inspire our stay in exile and metaphorically shine through the darkness and lack of clarity of the *galus*. At the same time, the haze and distractions of the *galus* can make it difficult to fully follow through on a person's religious plans. This halacha of preparing our lights reminds us that like the Chanukah lights must be fully fueled and energetically arranged in its multiple layers of *mehadrin*, we must also ensure that we start with the necessary requirements and enthusiasm to inspire ourselves and our children educationally. But this same halacha reassures us that just as we cannot guarantee that our lights will carry out the mission we planned and extinguish when they are supposed to, so too we may not know to what end our Torah education will shine through the haze. Our requirement is to try our best.

In a yeshiva system focused on grades and objective measures of accomplishment, we might do well in remembering that despite the strict contours of the mitzvah of Chanukah lights, they seem to provide an apt lesson in handling and overcoming failure and reminding us how to judge true success. Let us focus our energies on giving our children and our students the most fuel, encouragement, and the best

opportunities we can. We know that even if we provide the light, invest the energies, thoughtfully educate, and appropriately partner, whatever happens next is out of our hands. The candle may not ultimately shine as bright or as long as we hoped for, but we still must make every effort to notice the efforts that have been made to keep it alit.

War, What Is It Good For?

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"Thanks but no thanks!" It's an expression we might say when receiving a gift that was no gift at all, but instead resulted in hardship, challenge and frustration. While perhaps not the nicest of reactions, frankly, it's perfectly logical. What sane person thanks someone for causing more difficulty?

This same phrase comes to mind when we examine the text of Al Hanisim:

על הנסים ועל הפרקן ועל הגבורות ועל
התשועות ועל המלחמות שעשית לאבותינו
בימים ההם בזמן הזה.

For the miracles, and for the salvation, and for the mighty deeds, and for the victories, and for the battles which you have performed for our forefathers in those days at this time.

We thank Hashem for a variety of items, from miracles to salvation to redemption. However, buried in the list is one seemingly peculiar term: *milchamot*, battles. While it is easy to understand why we would thank Hashem for salvation and victory, why would we include battles as a source of gratitude? Wars by any measure are not traditionally a reason for praise and thanksgiving to Hashem! As we

all know too well, wars yield terrible consequences: shattered economies, depletion of resources, physical and emotional trauma, and worst of all, unbearable loss of life. Why would we include the *milchamot* in our gratitude within Al Hanisim?

On the most basic level, possibly the “*pshat*” (simple) understanding is that we are simply thanking HaKadosh Baruch Hu for fighting the wars on our behalf and for the resulting salvation. As we continue within Al Hanisim, in the case of the military victory of Chanuka, מסרת גבורים ביד חלשים ורבים ביד מעטים — we thank Hashem for delivering our enemies into our hands, despite Bnei Yisrael being severely outmatched in terms of numbers, weapons, even physical prowess. In other words, from this perspective, the war itself is not a reason for thanksgiving. Quite simply, when we thank Hashem, the gratitude is for the salvation from the war.

In addressing this question, Rav Soloveitchik zt”l (cited in *Harerei Kedem* 1:179) offers a different perspective. He notes that salvations, *teshuot*, would not be possible without the *milchamot*, the battles. In employing halakhic terminology, he depicts the *milchamot* as a *hechsher*, or a prerequisite, to the *teshuot*. In other words, the *teshuot* would never have come about without the wars. The Rav quotes the Beis HaLevi in developing this idea. When Bnei Yisrael sang to Hashem in praise right after the splitting of the Sea, they were clearly thanking Hashem for the miraculous salvation from the persecution of Mitzrayim. Yet, the *shirah* was not only for the miracles, but, in fact, for the slavery itself. The Beis HaLevi comments that there was a requirement of *shirah*, of praise, not

only for the *yeshuah*, the salvation, but for the *tzarah* (struggle)! *Shibud Mitzrayim* (slavery in Egypt) was necessary for the growth and development of Bnei Yisrael as a nation. In considering this nuanced point, we realize that were it not for the challenge and the adversity, we would not have grown, persevered, and even thrived. The battles that we thank Hashem for are not necessarily merely physical, they are figurative, and can lead us to a better place than we were before.

Ramban highlights the significance of the concept of a *nisayon*, a test, in his explanation of *Akedat Yitzchak* (Bereishit 22:1). In commenting on the phrase *V’haElokim nisa et Avraham* — Ramban develops the idea that a *nisayon* should be understood from the perspective of the person being tested. When Hashem tests a person, the intention is not for Him to see if the person can withstand the test. HaKadosh Baruch Hu, in His infinite wisdom and knowledge, surely knows the outcome of the challenge. Rather, the goal of the test is for the benefit of the one being tested. Ramban explains the complex idea that the *nisayon* enables us to actualize the potential that exists dormant within us. Since we are in control of our actions, how we respond to a challenge is completely up to us. We alone can choose whether to rise to the occasion. Hashem seeks to reward us not merely for a positive idea in our heart, but for an action, a good deed. Actualizing our potential can yield significant growth.

The *milchamot* we thank Hashem for in Al Hanisim remind us that challenge can be an impetus for growth and gratitude. It is not merely

a cliché to realize that growth is not always achieved at a mountain’s peak or summit but is often realized down in the valley. That is not to say that we look at suffering superficially through naïve, rose-colored lenses, but we acknowledge that there is genuine growth through hardship.

These past number of months have been, needless to say, challenging not only for the Jewish people, but for the global community at large. As we grapple with medical problems, economic fall-out, constant disruptions to schooling and schedules, and tragic losses, we are reminded through the words of Al Hanisim that even the most difficult challenges are opportunities for growth and connection to Hakadosh Baruch Hu.

Our Cherished Menorah: Finding Inspiration in the Symbols of our People

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A few summers ago, on our family’s return trip from Israel, we stopped for a few days in Italy. What a contrast. Just a day earlier we were in Jerusalem standing at the Western Wall, where below Robinson’s Arch we saw the enormous pile of stones left behind by the Romans upon desecrating and razing our Second Temple.

Now we were in Rome, the dreaded destination of so many of those Jewish exiles two millennia ago. As

we meandered through the city, my eyes were fixated on the city's centerpiece, the massive Colosseum. I couldn't help but imagine how many Jews saw their end in this notorious amphitheater. In that moment, I felt the weight of the suffering of my People.

The sense of tragedy and personal loss was compounded when we walked across the way and stepped into the Roman Forum. There before us — in all its brazen glory — stood the Arch of Titus. The imposing structure, which was completed after Titus' death, exists as a tribute to the merciless Roman emperor who destroyed the city of Jerusalem and our holy Temple in approximately 70 CE.

On the arch, we could vividly see the Temple's sacred Menorah, Chatzotzrot and Shulchan; precious spoils taken from our beloved Jerusalem. I overheard a nearby tour guide explain that the individuals depicted on the arch are Roman soldiers — not Jews — proudly taking the booty from Jerusalem's holy Temple.

There is a fundamental difference between the way gentiles and Jews experience these tourist attractions. For most people, the sites in Rome, the towering doorways, grandiose buildings and ancient statues attest to the city's historic might, power and greatness. For Jews however, ours is an entirely different experience. As we traverse Rome's cobblestone streets, we are reminded of the degradation and humiliation of our People.

The Midrash in Parshat Acharei Mot (*Vayikra Rabbah* 23:3) elaborates how Titus prided himself in having "defeated" the King in his own palace. The Gemara in *Gittin* 56b details the great sin Titus committed in the Holy

of Holies at the time of his entering the Temple in Jerusalem. Afterward, the mighty emperor plunged a sword into the Parochet, set fire to the holy edifice, and hauled off his newly acquired prizes, taking them with him to Rome.

Titus arrived at his capital as a hero. He was accorded great honor. Josephus, who had a personal relationship with the emperor, describes in detail the scene of the flamboyant dictator's arrival in Rome.

Upon analyzing this most difficult chapter in our people's history, my teacher, Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schacter, who provided many of the sources below, noted that historians over the past two millennia have debated whether or not the Menorah on the Arch of Titus is the actual Menorah from the Temple in Jerusalem. Is this the very Menorah that played such a central role in the Chanukah story?

It would seem that if this monument was built shortly after Titus returned to Rome, then there is a good chance that the image on the archway is actually how the Temple Menorah appeared. The problem is that if we take a closer look at the etching inside the archway, we find that the "base" of the Menorah is not how we know it to be.

Rashi in *Parshat Terumah* (25:31) says that the base of the Menorah had three legs. The Rambam, in *Hilchot Beit HaBechirah* 3:2, also says that it had three legs. Ancient drawings in Jericho and Beit She'arim all confirm that the Menorah in the Beit HaMikdash stood on three legs. So how do we explain this discrepancy?

A 1950's historian named W. Wirgin suggests that yes, the Temple Menorah had three legs. However, the

Menorah image appearing on the Arch of Titus had its legs covered up by an ornate base. For practical transport purposes, the Menorah was covered with a solid octagon-shaped base.

What makes things so interesting is that the emblem of the State of Israel depicts exactly the same Menorah that appears on the Arch of Titus. When looking closely at the *Semel Yisrael* we can clearly see that it too has a solid base at the foot of the Menorah. How did this come to be?

An important meeting took place on July 15, 1948, two months after the founding of the State of Israel. This was the date of the tenth session of the provisional government of Israel. At this meeting government leaders focused on the design of the emblem of Israel and the flag of Israel.

One hundred and sixty-four participants submitted proposals for how they felt the emblem and flag should appear. Of course, the emblem and flag should represent the values of the State of Israel.

Rav Yitzchak Isaac HaLevi Herzog was the first Chief Rabbi at the time. Years later, in 1956 (in *Sefer Zichron L'Shlomo S. Meir*), he reflected on that meeting. He wrote an article about the Menorah and in his writings he concluded that, of course, the emblem of the State of Israel should depict the Menorah. The Menorah is an appropriate symbol of the Jewish People, embodying our role as a light unto the world. It reminds us of the holiness, purity and even the stature of the Beit HaMikdash.

But "it's wrong," he writes, for the State of Israel "to copy the Menorah appearing on the Arch of Titus, since we know that the Temple Menorah had three legs." Rav Herzog felt that

the arch Menorah was not the correct choice to place onto the *Semel Yisrael*.

Responding to Rav Herzog was an Israeli historian named Gershom Scholem (in *Magen David: Toldotav Shel Semel*), who argued to the contrary. Scholem noted that there was a similar debate about the flag of Israel. Many did not want the Magen David (Star of David) on the flag of the State of Israel. For many Holocaust survivors in Israel, these discussions were being had just a few years after the war, and that Star of David brought back vivid memories of the yellow stars of the Nazis. That star was a reminder of our *hashpalah* and *yisurin* — the lowering, shaming and disgrace of our People.

But Gershom Scholem felt otherwise. He noted that ultimately, the newly formed Jewish government decided to *davka* put the Magen David onto the Israeli flag because this star now symbolizes that we have risen from the ashes. Scholem said, let's take that very star which we wore into the gas chambers and put it in the face of the world. Let's show the world *koach Yisrael*. Now we fly F-15 fighter planes over Auschwitz with the Star of David emblazoned on their fuselage. We have turned this star from being a *siman mavet* — a symbol of death — into a *siman chaim* — a symbol of life.

Similarly, says Gershon Scholem, let's specifically use the Menorah from the Arch of Titus to appear on the emblem of the State of Israel. Let that be the representation that stands right in front of the Knesset in Jerusalem. Precisely the Menorah that was hauled off by the Romans from Jerusalem; look at it now. See the Menorah in all its glory as it stands proudly, with the Grace of God, to protect the Jews of the world.

Titus, you mocked us with that Menorah, placing it on the arch that carries your name? See where this very Menorah stands today; tall and proud in the heart of a resurrected, vibrant and flourishing Jerusalem.

Two thousand years later, Rome feels like a dark and depressed city. It represents a civilization that is long past its peak. The Roman Forum is falling apart. Contrast Rome with Jerusalem. The City of Gold is glorious! It's a light on a hill. Expansive. Reborn. Stunning! Cranes and construction in every direction. After two thousand years, Israel and the Jewish People have risen again!

How we ought to be inspired by the words of the Prophet Isaiah (60:1):

קוֹמֵי אוֹרֵי כִּי בָּא אוֹרְךָ וּכְבוֹד ה' עָלֶיךָ זָרַח.
Arise! Shine! For your light has arrived and the Glory of Hashem has shined upon you.

What's Wrong with Studying Jewish History?

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We all know the basic story of Chanukah, but what is the source of our knowledge? Remarkably, though the history is transcribed in the Books of the Maccabees and other sources, very few details of the story are recorded in Chazal. Indeed, this seems to be one example of a broader phenomenon: when a student of history turns to Chazal or other traditional Jewish sources, there is very little to work with, leaving us to wonder why there is so little recorded history in the post-biblical period. True, Talmudic literature relates

numerous stories from which we can cobble together some sort of narrative, but it expresses little interest in systematic history.¹ Why is that?

One possible answer lies in the Talmudic concept of *mai de-havei havei* — whatever happened already happened, so what difference does it make now? For example, the Gemara *Yoma* 5b states that knowing the order in which the kohanim were dressed during the inauguration is unimportant, were it not for the fact that this information is relevant to interpreting the verses. The *Zohar* (*Beha'alotcha* 149b) powerfully expresses the notion that there is little value in knowing interesting historical tidbits. Why, it wonders, does the Torah tell us that Noah's ark landed on Mount Ararat? "Who cares whether it landed on this mountain or that one?" The *Zohar* answers that passages such as these teach us important values and deep secrets. Indeed, we can only perceive the message of the Torah when we dig below the surface.

The priority of the message over historicity is powerfully expressed by the principle of *ein mukdam u-meuchar ba-Torah* — Scripture is not written in chronological order — precision with respect to historicity is sacrificed in order to better convey the message of the Torah. Instead of approaching history from a dispassionate academic perspective, Jewish thinkers look to the past chiefly to cement their relationship with God and shape their belief in Him and His people. For this, stories suffice; we don't need history.

In my recently released book, *Illuminating Jewish Thought: Faith, Philosophy, and Knowledge of God* (Maggid Books, 2020, pp. 395–402 and 437–443), I elaborate on

why such an approach does not fully answer the question. Indeed, numerous traditional sources extol the value of knowing and understanding our past if we are to understand the present and prepare for the future, including the well-known verse:

זְכוֹר יָמֹת עוֹלָם בֵּינֵנו שְׁנוֹת דּוֹר וְדוֹר שְׂאֵל אָבִיךָ
וְיַגִּיד לְךָ וְיִאמְרוּ לְךָ.

Remember the days of old, Consider the years of ages past; Ask your father, he will inform you, Your elders, they will tell you.

Devarim 32:7

In the words of R. Mayer Twersky, “To be a Jew, to live as a Jew, means to live with a sense of history... A Jew’s history constitutes who he is, what he is, how he lives, to what he aspires.”²

What, then, does *mai de-havei havei* mean? Presumably, it informs us that some details of history are of little value. Along similar lines, Rambam writes that studying chronologies of kings or military chronicles is a waste of time. However, we cannot extrapolate from the fact that there is no usefulness in knowing the order in which the kohanim were dressed during the inauguration that all history is useless. The study of history is especially valuable when it will bring us to an awareness of God’s providential role in world events, or give us a better understanding of who we are and where we should go. Knowledge of our past must guide our current decisions; without it we are in danger or making grave mistakes.³ Thus we must return to our question, why is there so little Jewish History in Chazal and other traditional sources.

R. Shimon Schwab addresses the question of why Chazal do not record much history in an article originally published in *Mitteilungen* (Dec. Mar. 1984–85) and reprinted in *Selected*

Writings (Lakewood, N.J., 1988, pp. 232–235). R. Schwab notes that even though “the story of Chanukah is described in detail in the Book of Maccabees,” in Chazal there are “only a few scant references to this epic drama.” Moreover:

We have no authentic description by our Tanaim of the period of the Churban, the Jewish war against the Romans, the destruction of the Jewish state, the revolt and the downfall of Bar Kochba, except for a few Haggadic sayings in Talmud and Midrash. For our historical knowledge we have to rely on the renegade, Josephus Flavius, who was a friend of Rome and a traitor to his people.

Come to think of it, since the close of the Tanach at the beginning of the Second Beis Hamikdash, we have no Jewish history book composed by our Sophrim, Tanaim and Amoraim. The prophets and the Anshei Knesses HaGedolah have recorded all the events of their days as well as all previous periods. When prophecy ceased, the recording of Jewish history stopped at the same time. Why did our great Torah leaders not deem it necessary to register in detail all the events of their period just as the Neviim had done before them?

R. Schwab suggests a fascinating answer — to record history would be a violation of *lashon ha-ra*:

There is a vast difference between history and storytelling. History must be truthful; otherwise it does not deserve its name. A book of history must report the bad with the good, the ugly with the beautiful ... the guilt and the virtue ... It cannot spare the righteous if he fails, and it cannot skip the virtues of the villain.

Essentially, only with God’s directive can we record the unflattering truths of history.⁴ R. Schwab’s theory,

while interesting, raises a number of questions which we address in the above section of my book.

Another similar approach to why historical details of the Chanukah story are not recorded in Chazal can be found in R. Shlomo Brevda’s *le-Hodot u-le-Hallel* (adapted into English by R. Eliron Levinson as *The Miracles of Chanukah*). He suggests that Chazal deliberately concealed much of the Chanukah story in order to protect us from reading potentially harmful material. As a precedent, R. Brevda cites Ramban’s comments to *Bereishit* 12:2. There, Ramban inquires about the many missing details in Avraham Avinu’s life story, from when he is born at the end of *parshat Noach* until Hashem tells him to leave his home (beginning of *parshat Lech Lecha*) when Avraham is 75 years old (*Bereishit* 12:4). Ramban answers that the Torah is not fond of discussing idolatrous ideology. The Torah wished to avoid speaking about the heretical beliefs of those who opposed Avraham and to skip the religious debate between him and the people of Ur Kasdim. Ramban adds that this is also the reason the Torah does not elaborate on the advent of idolatry in the generation of Enosh, instead merely alluding to it.

Thus far, we have presented two approaches — Chazal were uninterested in history, or they felt it was inappropriate to convey history. Let us consider a third possibility based on Maharal’s teachings: Chazal did not reject history; they were seeking to go beyond history. Perhaps the Talmud focuses mainly on wisdom that is inherently valuable (Torah) or that has some sort of immediate utility (e.g. medicine).⁵ History does not have that same inherent value. While

important, insofar as it can serve as the basis for valuable lessons, and is even a reflection of God's plans, it lacks the same inherent significance (it is *mikreh*) and it is not immediately practical. Thus, while many Talmudic sources derive instruction from past events, history is absent. What Chazal do teach are the lessons and meaning that emerge from history.

Thus, Maharal writes that the Torah is not a history or biology book and should not be read as such. For example, when Chazal state that we have 248 *eivarim* and 365 *gidin*, they were not seeking to teach anatomy, but rather to teach us how the 613 *mitzvot* (which are comprised of 248 positive commandments and 365 negative commandments) perfect and sanctify the physical body. When the Torah teaches that rainbows are a covenant between God and man, it was not explaining the physics of the rainbow; it was imparting the spiritual reason behind the physical reason (refraction). Maharal (*Be'er ha-Gola*, 6) notes that many people incorrectly perceive a contradiction between Torah and science because they falsely presume that the Torah's goal is to convey the physical reasons. Likewise, with respect to history, if we wish to study the facts, we can turn to secular sources; Chazal sought to understand the reasons behind the reasons — what's behind the secular causation. The absence of science from Torah does not imply that science is not valuable. Likewise, the omission of history in Talmud does not indicate that it is useless, it simply reflects that it is not Torah.⁶

Moreover, from our very inception, God told us that we are (or can be) above history (*tzei me-itzneginut shelkha* — see *Nedarim* 32a and Rashi

to *Bereishit* 15:5). History focuses on secular causation, but the Jewish people merit unique providence. If history reflects nature (*teva*), we exist above nature (*le-ma'alah min ha-teva*).

Thus, if we wish to truly understand the story of Chanukah, knowing the history may be helpful, but it's insufficient and often misleading. Knowing the facts is not enough; we must learn their lessons. We must seek meaning, not information. We must remember that we are a people that have broken the patterns of history and whose future is not shackled by the past or present. Had the Chashmonaim studied military history or current events they may never have started up with the mighty Greeks. But instead they studied Torah. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Endnotes

1. It is not just the Talmud that omits this course of study. Dr. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi in *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (University of Washington Press, Seattle 1982) notes that the Rishonim for the most part do not engage in the study of history. He notes that the lack of interest in history in the medieval period cannot be attributed to the lack of Talmudic material, since medieval Jewry “blazed new paths in philosophy, science, linguistics, secular and metrical Hebrew poetry, none of which had precedents in the Talmudic history. Only in historiography, a field in which Islamic civilization excelled and forged an important tradition, did a similar interaction fail to take place” (33). Yerushalmi deals with the handful of possible exceptions, such as *Yosippon*, *Seder Olam*, and *Sefer ha-Kabbala*. While in the early-modern period Jewish historical works began to emerge, Yerushalmi claims that their authors largely were influenced by non-Jewish sources, or, later, were traditionalist responses to those works.

2. <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/976818/rabbi-mayer-e-twersky/victorythrough-surrender-how-to-live-and->

[die-alkiddush-hashem/](https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/976818/rabbi-mayer-e-twersky/victorythrough-surrender-how-to-live-and-die-alkiddush-hashem/). Likewise, R. Aaron Lopiansky recently wrote: “We need to teach our children history. And that history needs to include much more than dry names and dates and stories of gedolim. They need to have an accurate understanding of the experiences of the Jewish communities of each generation -- the daily life, the hardships, the challenges, the successes, and the wounds. The pasuk implores us to ‘contemplate the years of each generation.’” (“Sometimes Mashiach Is Not the Solution” *Mishpacha*, May 26, 2020)

3. Indeed, in his recent comments on current events R. Mayer Twersky implied that greater historical consciousness would help us better respond to come of the communal challenges we currently face. See http://torahweb.org/torah/special/2020/rtwe_sojourn.html.

4. While beyond the scope of this short piece, this would seem to relate to another fascinating position of R. Schwab concerning the controversy regarding the chronology of the kings of Persia.

5. Dr. Yerushalmi wonders why the Rishonim were interested in science and philosophy but not history. Here too, we might respond that these fields, especially when studied the way in which the Rishonim studied them, are inherently valuable. Linguistics too, when used to understand and interpret Torah, is intrinsically important.

6. Interestingly, Maharal's student, R. David Gans (1541–1613), was a rare example of a pre-modern Jewish historian. His history, entitled *Tzemach David*, includes two parts, the first containing the annals of Jewish history, the second those of general history. The introduction to the second section justifies authoring a “profane” subject like general history, showing that it can even be studied on Shabbat.