

## **Shabbat Chanukah: Faith is a Miracle**

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Some of the frontline, essential workers in the even earliest days of COVID-19 were not ones who were wearing Personal Protective Equipment. They did not even leave their homes. But for hundreds of thousands of Jews, they were no less essential, as they provided *refuat hanefesh*, they ensured the spiritual well being of Klal Yisrael. I am, of course, referring to our *poskim*. These distinguished rabbis were not directly prepared during their years learning for *semicha* to answer COVID-19 questions, and these were not questions one could simply look up in a *sefer*. Yet, they answered the most complicated and serious questions on the spot; they certainly did not have months to research the questions of life-and-death or how to make Pesach under the tightest constrictions. How did they do this? Certainly, they are geniuses. But the miracle behind the halachic guidance we received was not just to be found in the brilliant answers themselves. The rabbanim who were asked questions over the last nine months were inundated with thousands of questions. Who could handle that stress? This is the precise question that Rabbi Shay Schachter asked his father, Rabbi Hershel Schachter shlit"a. Such high-stakes questions and so many, not to mention the many questions that were maybe not as serious but nonetheless needed to be answered so that people could serve Hashem properly at a time where it has really mattered. Rav Shay asked his father, how do you remain so calm, without getting agitated?

*Emunah*, faith, is one of the most basic, axiomatic core principles of Judaism, but it is also one of the hardest aspects of Judaism. First of all, it is abstract and depends on one's feelings to a large extent. One who is trained to keep Shabbat does not find it to be extremely difficult; at its most basic level, keeping Shabbat involves actions, or refraining from actions, in a concrete fashion that is straightforward in your average situation. Putting up a *mezuzah* is a concrete, straightforward action that any Jew can do without tremendous difficulty. *Emunah*, however, does not involve a tangible and quantifiable action. What does it mean to have *emunah*? When do we need it most and do we even realize to what extent we need it? Furthermore, *emunah* is subject to personal experiences. No two people can arrive at *emunah* or experience *emunah* in the

same way. While Shabbat or *mezuzah* may look relatively similar to most people, we cannot noticeably observe other people's *emunah*, and even so, it will not be the same for some as for others. For these reasons, it can be easier to teach *halakha* than *emunah*, and it may be easier to keep *halakha* than to internalize the messages of faith. Meanwhile, it can be easier to be cynical and skeptical without the concrete attainment of God's presence than to believe without "empirical evidence" that God is behind everything that transpires in the world.

It is this struggle with *emunah* that makes the Chanukah story so great: it involves *emunah* at every step of the way. While it may seem like a military victory or the elongated life of oil may appear to be a miracle, the real miracle of Chanukah is faith itself. This is true because it simply would have been easier to not have faith.

Faith is at the core of the Maccabees' war. The real battle of Chanukah begins with a Jew sacrificing in an idolatrous matter, in accordance with the demands of King Antiochus. At this point, King Antiochus was doing his best to ban circumcision, outlaw Shabbat observance, and defile the Beit Hamikdash. What would - what did - most people who opposed this do at that time? I think those who see the clear wrong would be uncomfortable and outraged; maybe they would feel violated. Originally, the *kohen* Matityahu and his sons dressed in mournful garments to lament the assimilation taking place in their midst and the defilement of the Beit Hamikdash. Certainly, many of us, in the face of the powerful, would find it unproductive to confront. In fact, it is better to avoid confrontation than to take the risk of being oppositional. However, there was one Jew who did not see it this way. Matityahu, realized in perfect faith that this could not go on. While he could have cynically written off the Jews who hellenized or argued that the whole situation was a lost battle, Matityahu had a lot of faith. He had faith that if he were to do the right thing, he could make necessary change. Thank God he did. If he did not, who knows where we would be today? While he took the action he took, it could have only come from a place of belief that his actions mattered. He needed faith that he could change a perilous situation.

Faith is also the real miracle contained in the jug of oil that lasted eight days. The Talmud (Shabbat 21b) asks, "What is Chanukah?" In other words, what is its essence? It is about the Chashmonaim entering the Beit Hamikdash and finding a jug of oil that should have lasted for one day but lasted eight. In rereading this passage, I wondered,

why did they bother trying to light the *menorah* if they knew that the oil would only last one day? It might be temporary belief and then back to step one. It might have been more logical to wait to use that jug until there was a possibility that more oil would be ready soon, to wait entirely to start relighting the candles. Even more basic of an issue, why did they even search for oil? As the late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l wrote:

There was no reason to suppose that anything would have survived the systematic desecration the Greeks and their supporters did to the Temple. Yet the Maccabees searched and found that one jar. Why did they search? Because they had faith that from the worst tragedy something would survive. The miracle of the first night was that of faith itself, the faith that something would remain with which to begin again.

Here, too, the Maccabees understood that without *emunah*, nothing stood a chance. It was not enough to just be sad over the state of the Beit Hamikdash, as we express nowadays with Tisha B’av. It was not enough to merely see that some oil had lasted through the assault on God’s presence. Instead, the Maccabees needed to have faith that success would arrive at God’s doing, even if they did not understand how. They needed to have faith that they could rekindle the fire of the Jewish soul after so much damage had been done. Rav Eliezer Melamed, author of *Peninei Halacha* (Zemanim 11:5), calls this victory the victory of faith, and that faith is what we are celebrating on Chanukah.

Faith is also the explanation of Yosef’s success. Having been sold, nearly killed by his own brothers, taken to a foreign land, and eventually being imprisoned in this foreign territory, Yosef could have had good reason to give up. Why should he even try? What did he think he had to gain? Yet, he worked hard to be the most reliable servant of Potiphar, and he felt compelled to help the baker and the butler, his fellow prisoners. The Torah tells us three times that Hashem made Yosef successful and was with him. Potiphar was one who noticed this - וירא אדוניו כי ה' אתו וכל אשר עושה ה' הצליח בידו - How did Potiphar know that God was with Yosef? Rashi explains שם שמים שגור בפיו - Yosef always *mentioned* God was with him. This was not just Yosef speaking “frum” and saying lots of “Baruch Hashems” and “Im Yirtze Hashems.” But his success was directly correlated to a sincere and wholesome *emunah*. Here, too, this *emunah* is miraculous. Yosef could have given up and tried to merely survive. Yet, God gave him the mental strength to see

that there was still a full life to live and a difference he could make - both for himself and others. Yosef chose to recognize that, and his ability to do so becomes historically significant. His perspective of faith is also what enabled him to reassure his brothers that he was not angry about what they had done to him.

One of my eighth grade students pointed in class this morning that it is the Jews who are here today and not classical Greek culture. Indeed, this is so. Despite others' attempts, we not only survive but thrive. Our faith has guided us throughout history. But this faith remained miraculous. By logic, in 1948, the heroes of Zionism should have seen we were overpowered and expected the worse. But they had faith that once again, the few could overpower the many, the weak could overpower the mighty. The miracle of 1948-1949 was not just a military victory; it was the faith that it was even worth fighting. This story repeats in 1967. Before the Six Day War, according to Rabbi Chaim Jachter quoting Rabbi Yehuda Amital (*Reason to Believe*, p. 153), American Jewish leaders tried convincing the Israeli government to evacuate the Jews to avoid annihilation. The Chief Rabbinate designated mass burial sites. But threatened with destruction, Israel did not panic and flee. She instead decided that with proper convictions, she could succeed. If Israel had given in, there would have been no fight in the first place. Only with the faith that a victory could occur could the IDF act to begin with. That faith was miraculous and saved the State of Israel. One could say the same thing about the daring raid on Entebbe and the Yom Kippur War. It was a miracle of faith that inspired that the Jewish people could beat all rational odds.

When Rav Shay Schachter asked his father how he maintains such composure during an astronomically, continually stressful bout of helping others, Rav Schachter said it comes down to a maxim of the Ba'al Shem Tov. The beginning of the Rama's glosses in Shulchan Aruch quote the verse from Tehillim *שִׁוִּיתִי ה' לנגדי תמיד*, which we might translate as "I have set God before me at all times." But the Ba'al Shem Tov notes that "shiviti" means being temperate, moderated, composed. Read this way, the verse means "I am moderated and composed - because Hashem is with me always." The miracle of the exceptional halachic and spiritual guidance we have received from Rav Schachter is not just his genius but his *emunah*. He was able to help so much because he did not panic, knowing that God was with him in answering every single question. This

level of *emunah* itself is the mark of a *gadol* who can lead, and we have all benefited from this *emunah*.

The thing about the miracle of *emunah*, though, is that it does not require supernatural feats like a splitting of a sea or *mahn* falling from the sky. It is within each of us to find this *emunah*. As Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt”l wrote in his seminal article on *emunah*, “[the source of faith is faith itself](#).” It is true that, as Rav Lichtenstein wrote, “the greatest source of faith, however, has been the Ribbono Shel Olam Himself.” But if we are struggling to find *emunah*, we are already on the right path. God can and does provide for those who seek, and this is not a once-in-a-lifetime miracle. It is within ourselves to enhance *emunah*, to embolden the conviction that a difficult, seemingly hopeless situation can change. A combination of either being overwhelmed or even cynicism can enable us to believe that it is not even worth having faith or hope. It can actually be very challenging to achieve a pure faith that dire situations can be reversed. That is why *emunah* can be in and of itself a miracle. But it is a miracle in which we can actually *partner* with God.

It may have felt at many points during this pandemic that there is little reason to be optimistic. How will this persistent virus ever disappear? How will we ever go back to normal? Yet, appreciating the radiance of the Chanukah candles, we can be reminded how faith itself can help us emerge from a seemingly helpless and hopeless situation. While finding that faith itself is of miraculous significance, it is not beyond us to experience this miracle. We do not need to wait for God because God is ready for us to experience the miracle of faith. God has already given each of us this miracle to find *emunah*. May we all have the strength to partner with God to discover within our hearts the miracle of faith.