

י"ז כסלו תשפ"א

LIGHTS, CHANUKAH, ACTION!

והיה בית יעקב אש ובית יוסף להבה ובית עשו לקש ודלקו בהם ואכלום
ולא יהיה שריד לבית עשו כי ה' דברי

This פסוק in עובדיה relates that יוסף's descendants will ultimately be the "flame" that burns the "straw" that is עשו's descendants. In fact, this נבואה was יעקב's signal that he can return to עשו without his family being in danger.² What exactly is the symbolism of the flame, and why will that flame be the one to destroy עשו in the future? After all, it's smaller than the fire!

Fire is a unique substance, in that when it "gives", it doesn't lose anything. If I were to give you money, I by definition lose that money, while the original fire is just as strong after it gives over the flame as it was before. יעקב, the father, is compared to the original fire, which ignites the flame that is יוסף, the son. The role of the parent is to give of their fire and the fire of תורה to their children by dint of passing on the מסורה. By doing so, the parent is מקיים the principle of צריך שתהא מדליק, which means that one has to light the candle until the flame can go up (increase its light) on its own (without adjusting the wicks). When parents give a child the ability to grow independently, the child can soar to new heights on his own. He may go so far as to surpass the point his parents had in mind, and perhaps even surpass the point that the parents themselves are at. While this can be a bit off-putting to a parent, if they truly love their kids, they will take pride in anything and everything that they become, without any ounce of jealousy.⁴

When going through the גמרות in שבת that discuss חנוכה, the גמרא takes an interesting path. Before going into why we celebrate the חג (as the רמב"ם and שולחן ערוך begin חנוכה), the גמרא begins with the דין of what we can use to light נרות חנוכה. A simple reason for this is because the גמרא was previously discussing materials for נרות שבת, making this a natural segway. However, there is a deeper understanding here. The גמרא then goes into the סוגיא of לה אין זקוק לה, what happens when the נרות חנוכה go out. This is followed by the time to light נרות חנוכה, the best way to light (מהדרין מן המהדרין), and where to put the נרות חנוכה. After all of these הלכות, the גמרא finally discusses the story of חנוכה, and what the חג is all about. By taking this apart piece by piece, when we ultimately approach the סוגיא of מאי חנוכה, hopefully we will have a greater appreciation of this unique חג.

There are some materials that are disqualified from use for נרות חנוכה due to their being malodorous or inferior, which would cause the light to go out before it is supposed to. When the parents give the wrong tools to their children, they cannot properly shine and give their light to others. The גמרא proceeds to tell us two דינים; we are not required to relight the candles should they go out, and we are not allowed to get benefit from their light. However, we must put enough oil in to give the candle the potential to last the required amount of time. If we try to pass on our light, and the wick catches fire, we have done our part, provided that we have given enough for the light to last on its own.⁵ צריך שתהא מדליק עד שתהא שלהבת עולה מאליה, it's only considered to have been lit if it has the ability to perpetuate its light.

The next סוגיא of the גמרא is when the מצוה of lighting נרות חנוכה applies. The גמרא phrases this as עד שתכלה רגל מן השוק, until people leave the marketplace. This is because there is an ענין of פרסומי ניסא, publicizing the miracle. We then discuss the best way to light. There is a level of נר איש

¹ עובדיה א.יח

² בבא בתרא קכג:

³ רש"י במדבר ח.ב ע"פ גמ' שבת כא.

⁴ סנהדרין קה:

⁵ See last week's piece entitled "Nurtural, Natural, and Supernatural" for further elaboration

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וביתו, where one person per household lights one candle every night. However, the best way to light is מהדרין מן המהדרין. This is where everyone participates in the lighting. Within מההדרין מן המהדרין, there is a מחלוקת as to how to do it best. hold בית שמאי that we start with 8 candles on the first night, and work our way down to one candle on the last night, while בית הלל say we work our way up, lighting one candle on the first night, and ending with eight on the last night. This is based on the principle of מורידין מעלין בקודש ולא מורידין; when dealing with קדושה, we always increase, and aspire to reach higher levels. Finally, the גמרא tells us מבחוץ על פתח ביתו מבחוץ, we have to put the מנורה outside in front of our houses. These three concepts illustrate that in חינוך, we want to be able to add the lights as the night is starting, so the light can illuminate the otherwise dark world. The ideal way to light is to have as many lights as possible, getting the most amount of people involved, and always striving for greater heights. חינוך is not necessarily לבין אדם לחבירו, but can also be לעצמו בין אדם לאדם. We can be and need to be מחנך ourselves as well; after all, מי לי, מי לי? After we make ourselves into the best possible version we can be, we then display that image for the entire world to see while still connected to the בית, the source of everything we have.

Now that we've developed the background, the question can be addressed: מאי חנוכה? It is no coincidence that the word חנוכה is similar to the word חינוך; after all, the תורה is compared to light,⁶ and חנוכה is the holiday that celebrates the archetypal מסורה, the תורה שבעל פה. In order to internalize what חנוכה is about, we need to internalize what we are about. We are a nation not known for its physical prowess (as we say in על הניסים), but rather as a people connected to generations past and future through one thing, and that is the תורה. We are constantly under the threat of our enemies, yet we have proven that no matter what, we can and will remain steadfast in our harrowed heritage. While this חנוכה specifically may be more in the home than ever, perhaps we can capitalize on this opportunity that much more. The גמרא says that in a שעת הסכנה, we can put the מנורה on the table, which is compared to the מזבח.⁷ Just as the מזבח was מכפר for our עבירות, so too now our tables are מכפר by inviting עניים to eat with us. We may not be able to do that in the current situation, but if we look at our מזבח and מנורה, with all of the symbolism behind it, we can be זוכה to a גאולה, where we take our flames and finally destroy the בית עשו, enabling us to celebrate a חנוכה הבית. To conclude with a familiar message from the חנוכה candles, בזמן הזה הם לאבותינו בימים ההם.

⁶ משלי ו.כג
⁷ ברכות נה.