



AL HANISIM IN BIRKAT HAMAZON: A WINDOW INTO THE NATURE OF CHANUKA

The Gemara (*Shabbat 24a*) raises the question as to whether we should recite Al HaNisim in the Birkat HaMazon of Chanuka. Perhaps since Al HaNisim is rabbinic, it is not mentioned; on the other hand, since there is an obligation of *pirsumei nisa*, publicizing the miracle, on Chanuka, Al HaNisim should be recited in *benching*. The Gemara concludes that we need not recite Al HaNisim in *benching*; however if one decides to recite it, it is recited in the bracha of *hodaah* (Nodeh Lecha).

The Gemara only questions reciting Al HaNisim in Birkat HaMazon. It is taken for granted that Al HaNisim is recited in tefilla. Why tefilla differs from *benching* is not clear, and three explanations are offered. These three explanations have halachic

implications and can shed light on what Al HaNisim, and perhaps even what Chanuka is really about.

She'iltot

Behag and *Sheiltot* understand that tefilla differs from Birkat HaMazon in that tefilla is necessary on Chanuka while Birkat HaMazon is not. We are required to pray on Chanukah. We are not obligated to eat bread. Given the voluntary nature of Birkat HaMazon, perhaps there is no need or obligation to recite Al HaNisim.¹

What should emerge from this explanation is that Al HaNisim in Birkat HaMazon is only an option on Chanuka. On Purim, where there is an obligation of *seuda*, Al HaNisim would be required in Birkat HaMazon. One who omits Al

HaNisim in Birkat HaMazon would be required to repeat *benching*, much as one who omits *Retze* on Shabbat or *Yaale Veyavo* on Yom Tov, days when eating is mandatory, needs to repeat *benching*.² This position is noted in *Magen Avraham* 695. However, *Magen Avraham* does not ultimately endorse this position.³

Tosafot

Tosafot, *Shabbat 24a*, s.v. *Mahu*, offer a different explanation. According to Tosafot, one needs to add Al HaNisim in tefilla since tefilla is held in public and there is *pirsumei nisa*. *Benching*, which is recited privately in one's home, does not have a *pirsumei nisa* element to the same extent that tefilla does. Therefore, the Gemara questions if we need to recite Al HaNisim in *benching*.

For Tosafot, Al HaNisim is yet another way to publicize the Chanuka miracle. Not only does kindling the Chanuka candles fulfill *pirsumei nisa*, reciting Al HaNisim is also a fulfillment of *pirsumei nisa*.

It should be noted that according to Tosafot, the public nature of prayer mandates the recitation of Al HaNisim even in the silent Shemoneh Esreh. We never see Tosafot distinguish between the Chazan's repetition and the silent Shemoneh Esreh. We also never see Tosafot distinguish between Maariv, when there is no chazarat hashatz, and Shacharit and Mincha, when there is a public repetition of Shemoneh Esreh. It seems that for Tosafot, even private prayer counts as *pirsumei nisa*. The conclusion of the Gemara that one can or perhaps should recite Al HaNisim in Birkat HaMazon, indicates for Tosafot that *pirsumei nisa* is not as it is commonly understood: a public declaration of the miracle. Instead, even a personal awareness of the *neis* can constitute *pirsumei nisa*. *Pirsumei nisa* is as much to oneself as it is to others.

In American culture, the *pirsumei nisa* dimension of Chanuka has been interpreted as a requirement to proudly articulate our values. This may or may not be a correct understanding of *pirsumei nisa* according to some Rishonim. For Tosafot, however, *pirsumei nisa* may refer to articulating the reason for the festival to oneself, and does not need to be public in any way.

Rashi

Rashi, *Shabbat* 24a, s.v. *Mah Tefilla*, offers yet another explanation. According to Rashi, the Gemara never questions reciting Al HaNisim in tefilla, since Al HaNisim in davening is core to the Yom Tov of Chanuka. It may even be that the original Chanuka consisted of reciting Al HaNisim in tefilla and did not include *hadlakas neiros*.⁴ The Gemara (*Shabbos* 21b) tells us that when that small cruse of oil was found, *keva'um v'asa'um yamim tovim b'hallel v'hoda'ah* — they established and made them holidays of Hallel and thanksgiving. The message of Chanuka according to Rashi, the real reason the Yom Tov was established, is to recite Hallel and for *hodaah*, reciting Al HaNisim in Shemoneh Esreh.

Hodaah

To my mind, there are three ways in which Chanuka epitomizes *hodaah*: First, recognition that we received more than our due and admitting that we are undeserving. Second, the need for thanks to be ongoing. Third, the attention to fine details that underlie genuine *hodaah*.

Hodaah means much more than simply offering thanks. The Gemara (*Brachos* 7b) teaches that until the birth of Yehuda, no one expressed thanks to Hashem. Of course, on a literal level, this is not true. As *Torah Temima* (to Bereishit 29:35) notes, many before Leah expressed thanks. However, there was something special

about Leah. When Leah named her son Yehuda, she was demonstrating her awareness that she received more than her due. Theoretically, each of the four *imahos* should have borne three children. Now that Leah bore child number four and received more than her due, she expresses *hodaah*.⁵

Hodaah reflects the awareness that we received more than our due. By recognizing that we received more than what was due, we admit that we are underserving. The word *hodaah* means to give thanks, but it also means to admit (*hodaah* in a monetary context means that one admits to owing money).

Admitting that we were undeserving and recognizing that we received more than we were due are central themes in Chanuka. The entire *neis* was unnecessary. We could have lit the Menorah with *tamei* oil, we could have obtained *tahor* oil from a closer location, we could have cut each wick to one-eighth of its size and lit the Menorah for eight nights with only that one jug of oil. However, that is not what actually happened. We received a special gift, not a gift that comes on a birthday or anniversary and is expected, but a gift that comes out of nowhere and reflects true love. For these extra gifts, Chanuka was established. Because we received much more than we needed, we must offer genuine thanks, *hodaah*.

The name Yehuda also shows that the thanks Leah gave was not a one-time occurrence. She said *ha'pa'am odeh et Hashem* — Should I only thank



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Hashem now this one time? No, thanks must be ongoing. That boy was called Yehuda throughout his life to demonstrate that thanks must be ongoing. In a similar vein, the Al HaNisim of Chanuka goes out of its way to note how the victory at that time remains with us, on some level, to this very day, *ule'amcha Yisrael asita teshu'a gedola ufurkan kahayom hazeh* — and for Your nation, Israel, you brought about a great salvation as this very day.

The more sensitive our soul is, the more we recognize all the good that has come our way. The more we feel that we are undeserving, the more *hodaah* we offer.

Here lies another Chanuka lesson. Anyone can appreciate the military miracle of Chanuka. How the few weak yeshiva bochrin defeated the Selucid Greek Army with its elephants and weapons. However, it takes a sensitive soul to recognize that locating a pure cruse of oil was

also miraculous. It was not simply a coincidence that a jug of oil was hidden. The jug was not simply overlooked. It was miraculously saved. And for that we give thanks.

Genuine *hodaah* involves recognizing the small things, in particular those small things that too often get overlooked. A card that says “thank you for everything” means nothing. However, when we spell out, in detail, the many favors that were performed and all the benefit that these favors brought, that is genuine *hodaah*. The Gemara (*Brachos* 59b) teaches that when the first rains fall in Israel after a long drought, we recite a special tefilla — *modim anachnu lefanecha al kol tipah utipah shehoradeta lanu* — We express gratitude for each drop of water. Thank you alone doesn't cut it. On Chanuka, we thank Hashem not only for the big miracle of the war; we recognize the small miracle of locating a jug of oil. This attention to a seemingly small and trivial detail is a demonstration of genuine *hodaah*.

Endnotes

1. This explanation has a basis in *Berachot* 49a.
2. Netziv in his commentary on *Sheiltot* 26:13, makes this point. However, this does not ring true with regard to the *Behag*. Although *Behag* in *Hilchot Chanuka* understands the difference between Birkat HaMazon and tefilla based on whether one has an obligation to eat, he nonetheless writes that one who omits Al HaNisim in Birkat HaMazon on Purim need not repeat *benching*. Apparently *Behag* assumes that one must eat on Purim, but one need not eat bread.
3. Raavya believes that one who omits Al HaNisim (even on Chanuka) needs to repeat *benching*, but this is for an entirely different reason. See Mordechai, *Masechet Shabbat* #279.
4. See my article, “My Chanuka while the Beit Hamikdash Stood,” *Torah To-Go*, Chanukah 5774.
5. See Rashi Bereishis 29:35.