

SURPRISING LESSONS FROM THE LAWS OF CHANUKAH

by Rabbi Yisrael Rutman

The festival of Chanukah is one of the best loved and most widely observed events in the Jewish calendar. The powerful images of the miracles of the Jewish victory over the Selucid Greeks in the 2nd Century B.C.E. and the miracle of the one-day supply of oil burning eight days in the re-dedication of the Temple are an annual inspiration to Jews everywhere. Like every mitzvah, Chanukah has its special laws and customs. A closer examination of the laws and customs of Chanukah yields some surprising insights.

A Mitzvah of Sharing: If a person has only enough oil and wicks for himself for the eight days of Chanukah, whereas his impoverished neighbor has none, he should share with him, even though he will not have enough left over for all eight candles at the end of the festival. This is because the idea of adding on a candle each night until we reach eight is what is known as hiddur, a beautification of the mitzvah; the essential mitzvah is just one candle per night per household. Better to share your oil and enable another Jew to fulfill the essential mitzvah along with you, than to beautify your own while he has nothing.

In A Time of Assimilation: The candle lighting was originally intended to be performed outside in the doorway or courtyard at sunset. This, in order that people coming home from work would see the festival lights. Chanukah is unique in this respect. We have no other commandment in Judaism which requires such public display. This is because during the era of the Hasmoneans, there was rampant assimilation among the Jewish people in Israel due to the influence of Greek culture. The Sages instituted the candle lighting for outdoors to publicize the miracles that G-d had done for His people. It was not just a celebration for the Hasmonean priests, within the confines of the Temple, but a way of inspiring all of the Jewish people to return to their tradition. In their enactment of the Chanukah festival, the Sages were concerned that all the people, including those who had strayed from Jewish tradition, be included.

A Unique Blessing: Most of us are familiar with the blessings said by the person lighting the candles. What is less well known, though, is that there is also a blessing for one who is not lighting. Upon seeing the Chanukah candles burning, he makes a blessing on the miracles that were done for our

fathers." It is unique to the festival of Chanukah that someone not performing the mitzvah (and no one is doing it for him) makes a blessing just on seeing a mitzvah done by others. This, too, may be explained by the special concern that the Sages felt for all Jews, including the non-observant. The candles were made a public display for their sake. Therefore, when a Jew who, upon seeing the lights burning, is aroused by them to take a renewed interest in his Jewish identity, that special dimension of the mitzvah has been fulfilled, and a blessing of thanks to G-d is in order. (Sukat Dovid)

Priorities: The Talmud raises the question regarding a person who has only enough oil for either Shabbat or Chanukah candles, but not both. (Each year, Shabbat and Chanukah coincide at least once during the eight-day festival.) Which takes precedence? The Talmud determines that Shabbat takes precedence because of Shalom Bait, family harmony. The Chanukah candles (that were then placed in the doorway) publicize the miracle of the oil, but the Shabbat candles illuminate the home. It is deemed more important that there be light in the home for the enjoyment of the Shabbat meal.

The following story is told of the Chafetz Chaim, the spiritual leader of European Jewry before World War Two: The time for lighting the Chanukah candles had arrived, and his guest was looking forward eagerly to sharing this moment with the great rabbi. But the Chafetz Chaim did not rise to light the candles. This, to the puzzlement of his guest, since the Chofetz Chaim's meticulousness in observing the mitzvot was well known. A considerable amount of time passed, and, inexplicably, he still did not light. Finally, long after the proper time for lighting had passed, the door opened and the Chafetz Chaim's wife entered. Without saying a word, he immediately rose and, with his wife and guest at his side, lit the Channukah candles. Afterwards, the Chafetz Chaim, sensing his guest's curiosity, explained that he had delayed lighting out of consideration for his wife, whom he knew took great pleasure in being present at the lighting. Had she missed it, after returning from a trip, she would have been disappointed. Lighting the Chanukah candles is a great mitzvah and should be performed with alacrity, but since the Sages teach that Shalom Bait takes precedence over Chanukah, it was certainly warranted to delay the lighting out of consideration for his wife's feelings.

G-d's Business: The candle should contain sufficient oil (or wax) at the time of lighting to burn until at least half an hour after the stars come out. In the event that the light is extinguished before the prescribed time, it is proper to re-light (without a new blessing). However, one is not obligated to re-light; he has fulfilled the mitzvah with the original lighting. This is an application of the principle that "the lighting makes the mitzvah." This symbolizes the Jewish view that in life generally our responsibility is to make our decisions and act to carry them out; but if, in the end, the bright dream of success is extinguished, it does mean we have failed. Our job is to decide and to act; success or failure is God's business.

Jewish Ambition: In spiritual matters, there is the principle of ma'alim b'kedushah, ascending in holiness. This is exemplified by the way in which we light Chanukah candles. We light one candle on the first night, two on the second, and so on, until we conclude the festival with eight candles burning. In Chanukah, it is meant to convey the specific message of the increase of the miracle, as the one-day supply of oil continued to burn and burn for eight days. In a general sense, though, it expresses the Jewish concept of ambition: that we should always strive to attain greater and greater appreciation of the miracles that God does for us, and to reach for ever higher levels of spirituality.

Great and Small: On Chanukah there is Hallel and Hoda'ah. Hallel is a song of praise of G-d for the miracles He does for the Jewish people. Hoda'ah is an acknowledgement of the fact that we are undeserving of the great things He does for us. A Jew must go through life with this dual recognition: of the greatness of G-d, on the one hand; and of the smallness of His creatures, on the other. (S'fat Emet.)

Souls on Fire: Wicks and oils that are not fit for burning as Shabbat candles - because they don't burn so well - are nevertheless usable on Chanukah. Each letter of the Hebrew word for soul - nefesh - stands for a component of the candle: ner (flame), ptilah (wick) and shemen (oil). Those Jewish souls that don't burn so well - that are not aligned well with their Jewish identity - all during the year on Shabbat, are, due to the special power of the lights, able to burn brightly on Chanukah. For on Chanukah, perhaps more than any other time of year, one is able to get in touch with his Jewish identity. (S'fat Emet.)

*** E-geress is a Hebrew word meaning letter or correspondence.*

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