

A MOMENT OF EXHILARATION: UNDERSTANDING THE BRACHOS ON THE MENORA

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

After many hours in the air, your flight gets ready for landing. The pilot announces that as the plane approaches the airport, the Alps will be visible in the distance. You look out the window, and for a second your heart freezes as you witness the most breathtaking sight that you have ever seen: the snow-capped peaks of the Swiss Alps. While still entranced by their magnificence, you reach instinctively for a camera but, on second thought, grab a siddur and recite the blessing of oseh ma'aseh bereishis, "He who makes the wonders of Creation."

Our Sages understood that instances such as these are few and far between and therefore obligated us to seize the opportunity afforded us by our excitement to praise Hashem for the marvels of His Creation. Perhaps there is no greater inspiration than a miracle that transpired for the entire Jewish nation. For this reason, when we light the menorah on Chanuka we recite the bracha of she'asa nissim (He who does miracles).

Our airborne friends certainly felt more excitement when they actually viewed the Alps than when they heard that they would soon be visible. Since the goal of the bracha of she'asa nissim is to express our awe of Hashem's works, one would expect that the best time to say this bracha is after having lit the candles, while still in a state of exhilaration over the beauty of these lights. Although some opinions concur with this line of reasoning (Bach according to Meseches Sofrim 20:6), the halacha is that the bracha should be recited beforehand. Why?

"Before serving Hashem with the body, one should first serve Him with his soul" (Ritva, Pesachim 7b). At times, we get so involved with the preparations and fulfillment of a mitzva that we might forget that the goal of our actions is to bring our neshamos closer to our Creator. A bracha serves as a gentle reminder that by doing a mitzva we achieve this end. Therefore our Sages directed us to make the bracha on the menorah over le'asiasan, before lighting the candles (Rema 676:2).

What if one forgets to make the blessings in the midst of all the excitement over lighting the menorah? As long as he has not lit all of the candles, he may recite the brachos on the remaining ones. If he has finished with the mitzva, he has lost the opportunity to make the blessing lehadlik ner Chanuka, but he may say she'asa nissim and shehecheyanu as long as the lights are still aflame (Mishna Berura 676:4).

Haneiros Halalu

After the first candle has been kindled (or, according to some, after all the candles have been lit), we sing Haneiros Halalu, a piyut about the Chanuka candles (Mishna Berura 676:8). A similar custom is followed on Purim; after the reading of the megilla, we say Asher Heinei (Rema 692:1). What is the significance of these practices?

Both the lighting of the menorah and the reading of the megilla are done for the sake of publicizing, understanding and internalizing Hashem's miracles. Although the brachos that are said before the lighting of the menorah help us to tune in to what we are about to do, after the brachos and the mitzva are complete, we still need to contemplate the importance of what we have done. A short synopsis of why we light the menorah, or read the megilla, drives home this message and allows us to absorb the full impact of these special moments.

What's in an 'and'

The poskim argue about the wording of the bracha of she'asa nissim, whether one should say bizman hazeh, in this time, or ubizman hazeh, and in this time. At first glance this question might appear to be splitting hairs. Does it really make such a difference if one recites the blessing with the word and or without it? When one looks deeper, however, this dispute touches on the very essence of Chanuka.

"The purpose of overt miracles is to bring us to recognize that the hidden miracles are also miracles" (Ramban at the end of parashas Bo). When we say, "Who did miracles for us in these days and at this time," we imply that we are thanking Hashem for both types of miracles: both the revealed miracles that took place "in this time," during Chanuka, and the concealed miracles that transpire daily, "in these days" (Levush 682:1).

Other poskim say that the proper phrasing of the bracha is, "Who did miracles in these days at this time." According to this wording, the bracha is referring only to the overt miracles that took place "at this time during these days," during the period of the Chashmonaim (Taz 682:5). However, the halacha is that on both Chanuka and Purim we say bizman hazeh, omitting the word and" (Mishna Berura 676:1).

A Wayfarer's Prayer

"The mitzva of ner Chanuka is to light outside the door of one's house. If one lives in an upper story, he lights by the window facing the public domain, and in times of danger it is sufficient to light on the table" (Shabbos 22a). All of these places have one thing in common; they are located by one's home. Someone who is traveling and will not have a place of residence that night cannot light the menorah. (Some modes of transportation such as a train may be suitable to fulfill the mitzva, and a question should be asked of a Rav).

Even an individual who cannot light the menorah still feels a sense of tremendous inspiration when he sees the candles burning and remembers all of the miracles that were done for the Jewish people in

the times of the Chashmonaim. At that instant, since the miracle has been publicized to him, he becomes part of the legacy of Chanuka and is obligated to express his feelings by reciting the bracha of she'asa nissim (Sedei Chemed Chanuka 9:3). On the first night of Chanuka he should add the blessing of Shehecheyanu (Shulchan Aruch 676:3).

If the traveler's wife or older child will be lighting the menorah for him, can he still say these blessings? Since he has already fulfilled his obligation of publicizing the miracle by having the menorah lit on his behalf, our Sages did not see fit to require him to recite a blessing upon seeing the candles (Ran and Rashba, Shabbos 23a). Therefore, halacha lemaaseh, one says she'asah nissim and shehecheyanu only if a menorah will not be lit for him (Mishna Berura 676:6).

A single Jew is driving on the highway on a seemingly never-ending stretch of highway in Midwest America and suddenly remembers that today is Chanuka. He looks around and realizes that there is not a single menorah lit for hundreds of miles in any direction. Some Rishonim say that he may nonetheless recite the blessings as on other Yamim Tovim (Meiri, Shabbos, ibid.; Sheiltos, parashas Vayishlach 26). However, since the poskim are in doubt regarding this halacha, a bracha should not be said (Sha'arei Tzion 676:3).

Grabbing the Moment

Every night of Chanuka we sing the piyut Maoz Tzur, which mentions the principal redemptions throughout the history of the Jewish people. It is clear why we specify Chanuka, for that is the holiday that we are currently experiencing, but why do we mention all of the other periods?

We have a similar situation when one comes to a place where a personal miracle occurred. He recites the bracha, "Blessed is He Who made a miracle for me in this place." If he had a number of miracles transpire, he should add "in this place and this place ..." (Shulchan Aruch 218:4-5). If the main bracha is for the miracle that happened at the place that he is actually looking at, why must one mention all the other miracles that happened to him?

The same question can be asked with regard to Birkas Hamazon. Why isn't it enough to thank Hashem for the food and sustenance that He has given us, which has occasioned our gratitude at this moment? Why must we also express our gratitude for Torah and Eretz Yisrael as well?

Our Sages understood that when a person reaches a state of inspiration about one of Hashem's miracles, he should not let this opportunity slip through his fingers. Rather he should use this valuable moment in order to thank Hashem for all of the kindness that he has done for him (Rav Yoel Schwartz as cited in Mizmor LeSoda, p. 40-41). After thanking Him for the entire gamut of Jewish history, he will see clearly that Hashem's Hand is the one and only force guiding it, and he will realize that the same is true about his personal life. This will bring tremendous closeness to his Creator.

Through the recitation of the extra tefillos and brachos of Chanuka, may we all be inspired to recognize Hashem's glory and splendor at every moment and be motivated to serve Him with a

fresh surge of inspiration during the rest of the year.

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