

CHANUKAH

by Rabbi Shaya Karlinsky

Given the small number of original Rabbinic sources that discuss Hanukkah, there are an overwhelming number of questions that arise. We shall present some of these questions, and see if answering them can give us a deeper understanding of the important role Chanukah has in the development of Judaism in modern times.

1. The Beit Yosef (Orach Chaim, 670) asks the classic question about Chanukah. "Why did they make Chanukah eight days? There was enough oil in the flask [to burn] for one night, so it turns out that a miracle happened for only seven nights!" Since the oil burned naturally for one of the days, we should celebrate Chanukah for only seven days.
2. There are two Halachic principles which seem to render the miracle completely unnecessary. "Ones Rachmana patrei" states that the Torah exempts one who is a victim of circumstances beyond his control. "Tuma hutra betzibur" states that if the entire community is impure, service is permitted in that impure state. The lack of pure oil after the Beit Hamikdash was rededicated was certainly beyond the control of the Jews. And since it was a communal situation, even the defiled oil could have been used. Why should G-d have performed a supernatural miracle, altering the order of creation, under such circumstances?
3. There were ten miracles on a daily basis in the Beit Hamikdash (Avot 5:5) many of them much more striking than this one. Yet we don't find any commemoration of them. And Mishna and Gemara tell us of many other great miracles throughout this period, none of which led to days of commemoration. What was so special about the miracle of the oil that made it deserving of such prominence?
4. The major decrees of the Greeks were to prohibit observance of the Shabbath, Brith Milah (Circumcision), and Kiddush Hachodesh (court sanctification of a new month based on the new moon). Why did these three specific Mitzvot bother the Jews more than the other 610 Mitzvot?
5. They also prohibited the study and dissemination of Torah Sheb'al Peh (oral Torah) while elevating the Torah Shebichtav (written Torah) by having it translated into Greek. Why did they make such a striking distinction?

The texts dealing with Hanukkah are themselves a source for additional questions.

We are taught in Megilat Ta'anit (Ch. 9) of the events leading up to the Chanukah miracle. The Rabbis

ask: "Why did they make Chanukah eight days? The other Chanukahs (referring to the consecrations of the Mishkan (Tabernacle) built by Moshe Rabbeinu, and of the first Temple built by Shlomo) were seven days!? The Chashmonaim entered the Heichal (Sanctuary of the Temple), built the Altar and plastered it, fixed the service vessels, and were occupied with [the Heichal] (misaskim bo) for eight days."

It sounds like the actual work needed to take only a short time, yet they prolonged the process, almost artificially, for eight days! What were the Chashmonaim occupied with for eight days that couldn't have been accomplished in less time, and what are the Rabbis telling us by emphasizing it?

In the Midrash on the second verse in the Torah (Breishit 1:2; Breishit Rabba 2:4) the Rabbis teach us that the forces which would exile the Jewish people throughout history existed from the time of the creation process. V'Haretz hayta tohu - zu Malchut Bavel...: "The earth was desolate," this is the Babylonian kingdom...; VaVohu - zu Malchut Madai...: "and chaotic" is the kingdom of Persia...; V'Choshech - zu Malchut Yavan, sehechshicha eineihem shel Yisrael b'gzeiroteihem...: "and darkness" is the kingdom of Greece, which darkened the eyes of the Jews with their decrees.

Calling the Greek kingdom one of darkness is particularly difficult to understand. Greek ideology loved and worshipped wisdom. They were the most enlightened society until that time, with most of our western thought, culture, and intellectual and academic disciplines having developed from it. Chazal respected wisdom, and they teach us: Chochma BaGoyim ta'amin, wisdom can be found among non-Jewish nations. The Greeks themselves appreciated the wisdom of the Torah. That was one of the reasons they wanted the Torah translated into Greek -- so they could better understand it. It is therefore strange that from among all the kingdoms, the Rabbis chose to call such an enlightened society "choshech," darkness.

We will begin our discussion from this last question, which will enable us to gain a deeper understanding of the conflict between Jewish and Greek ideology.

Noach had three children, Shem, Cham, and Yefeth, the forefathers of the world cultures. Shem in Hebrew means "name," which represents the essence of something, the pnimiyut, the internal reality. The ancestor of Greece was Yefet, from the word yofi, representing the external beauty.

The Greeks believed in nature, and they worshipped it. They placed primary importance externals: strength; the physical body; majority subjugates the minority; survival of the fittest; what you see is what you get. Their ideology required man to operate within the laws of nature, to try to dominate nature, and when necessary to pay the required homage to the gods of nature, gods imbued with observable human characteristics, lusts and limitations. Only what was observable on the outside counted, not what was hidden inside. Even their wisdom was based on what man, exclusively through his natural human intellect, could figure out and understand. Chazal appropriately called that "Chochma Chitzonit," exterior wisdom.

The Jews believed in the existence of an inner dimension of reality, pnimiyut, which was itself not

observable but which was the essence of all that was observable. Everything that exists is an outward revelation of this inner reality. The source of this inner reality is the Divine, and every aspect of creation is an outward revelation of G-d, whether it be nature, Torah or man himself. (For example, the physical body reflects the number of positive (248) and negative (365) commandments of the Torah. Modern discoveries in quantum mechanics reflect a physical world working on an atomic level in ways that are similar to the metaphysical world painted for us by Chazal and the Kabbalists.)

Our ancestor was Shem. The ancestor of Greece was Yefeth (Breishit 10:4). The fundamental conflict between Israel and Greece is embodied in the names of our ancestors: The primityut of Shem or the chitzoniyut of Yefet; the inner dimension, or what appears obvious on the surface; the hidden essence or "what you see is what you get."

This dialectic encompasses the world, nature, and even the Torah. The Torah itself has an exterior dimension, the Written Torah, which is accessible to all nations. This is how the Bible has become the basis of three major religions. But there is also an inner hidden dimension, the Oral Torah, and this is where the hidden Divine aspects of Torah reside. The Oral Torah can be likened to the "personality" of the Torah, the essence of the Torah. This dimension is accessible only through a combination of man's intense intellectual struggle coupled with Divine inspiration. Torah Sh'bichtav, the Written Torah, has no real impact on a person when it is studied only on its surface level without its inner dimension, which is why the non-Jewish world can have the Bible and be so little influenced by it. Yet this is exactly the kind of Torah the Greeks believed in, a wisdom that need not change the essence of the person, that need not bring with it any obligations, that has no inner affect. Torah was treated as any other wisdom, and they had it translated into Greek to show that even the Torah could be part of their curriculum. The Jews had no monopoly on it. From the perspective of wisdom and intellect, the Greeks appeared correct, and the Jews were a threat to this limited perspective. The Greek defense was to usurp the Written Torah for themselves, and eradicate the concept of Torah Sheb'al Peh, an Oral Torah.

As we say in Al Hanissim: Lehashkicham Toratechah (To make the forget YOUR Torah) uLeha'aviram M'CHUKEI Retzonecha (and to make them transgress your statutes). Chukim, statutes, are the Torah laws which defy rational explanation, reflecting the hidden inner dimension that exists in the Torah. This is exactly the dimension of Torah that the Greeks were trying to eradicate, for this drove home the fact that it was G-d's Torah; that there was wisdom that transcended man's own wisdom, and that there were laws that were not accessible to man's understanding. If Judaism has a conflict with Western culture in the twentieth century, it is with the blatant superficiality and emphasis on externals that pervades. But this is a natural extension of the perspective that says that the only reality is one that we can see and figure out for ourselves.

Torah, viewed only with its exterior dimension, is another way to enrich life. Jews view Torah, with its inner, hidden dimensions, as life itself.

Greek Spirituality vs. Jewish Spirituality

The Greeks believed that the only reality is the physical reality of nature, and that nature was an absolute. If there is a drought, it is the result of natural cycles, and man has to wait out these natural cycles. If calamities befall the world, we search for geopolitical, economic, social, or psychological factors to explain them. G-d has no input in the world after its creation, and it is propelled by fixed forces.

The Jews believed that there is an ongoing relationship between G-d and man, and that the laws of nature are related to a spiritual reality. These two ideas are embodied in Shabbath and in Kiddush HaChodesh, sanctification of the New Moon. Shabbath, the seventh day, imbues the six days of creation with a Kedusha, an INTERNAL spiritual reality which the Greeks denied could exist. And Shabbat embodied a Brith, a covenant, between G-d and the Jewish people, testifying to a unique relationship that existed on an ongoing basis between them. Kiddush HaChodesh manifests man's influence over the spiritual process. Without man's input, there are holidays with no holiness. Man can actually create (hidden) spiritual reality.

Are We Prisoners of Nature?

The Greeks believed that man is a product of nature and was controlled by it. His physical drives and lusts were an integral part of his essence, and they controlled him. Brith Mila represented Judaism's conviction of man's ability to transcend his natural lusts and instincts, to control and elevate them. Man is the unification of the physical body with an inner soul. There was a "pnimiyut," an inner dimension, to the external shell.

This uniquely Jewish concept of man having the ability to transcend his nature is represented by the number eight.

One of the most frequently occurring numbers that we encounter is the number seven. It is the number of days of creation of the world, the days of the week, the days of Sukkot and Pesach, the weeks in the Omer cycle, the number of years in Shmittah and Yovel cycles, the number of days the Torah considers a woman a Niddah, the number of days required for ritual purification. It is a number very much tied to cycles in nature. It is also the number of Mitzvot non-Jews have, and 70 was the number of cows (representing the 70 nations) which were sacrificed on Sukkoth, a holiday of seven days, and in which non-Jews could have a part. When Bila'am brought sacrifices in preparation for cursing the Jews, he brought seven cows and seven rams on seven altars (Bamidbar Ch. 23). It is a number very much associated with universalism as well as the totality of material creation.

The Maharal elaborates on this with the illustration of the six directions in the three-dimensional physical world, plus the center point, which itself has no dimension but is the anchor and the essence of the six directions. This gives a total of seven points, with the seventh representing the spiritual dimension that exists within nature. This spiritual dimension is a property of the natural world, and is not something unique to Jews, as we find even non-Jews searching for meaning, for a

spiritual significance in their lives.

The number eight, on the other hand, represents a dimension transcending nature. This dimension is reserved exclusively for the Jews. We find the number eight in Brit Mila, the eternal covenant of membership of the Jewish people. Shavuoth, the day the Torah was given to the Jewish people, is on the day following the seventh week of seven days, and is considered like the eighth day of Pesach, paralleling Shmini Atzereth as the eighth day of Sukkoth (Ramban Vayikra 23:36; Maharal Ner Mitzvah). Shmini Atzereth, following the seven days of Sukkoth, is designated as a private celebration for the Jews with G-d (Yalkut Shimoni 782, Bamidbar Ch. 29.) In the Beit Hamikdash an animal could only be brought as a sacrifice from the eighth day, after it has been with its mother through one natural cycle of seven days. The number eight is found in things that are unique to the Jewish people and in things which transcend the order of nature.

The Spiritual and Physical United

The Psalm of the day for Chanukah is Tehilim Ch. 30, Mizmor Shir Channukat HaBayit LeDavid... Yet the Psalm seems to have nothing to do with Beit David, the Beit HaMikdash, or its consecration. It is a description of the trials and tribulations buffeting man during the vicissitudes of human life. What makes this appropriate for Channukat HaBayit, the consecration of the Temple?

The Mishkan and the Beit Hamikdash are the meeting places between infinite G-d who descends to manifest his presence in the finite world, and finite man who strives to elevate himself to the heights of an infinite G-d. It is the most tangible manifestation of the concept of "chibur elyon v'tachton," the unification of the transcendent spiritual world with the material physical world.

But the challenge of a Jew is to reveal that unification in the ongoing functioning of the world, in nature, and in man himself.

The rising and setting sun, the rainfall, the birth of a baby, and all the daily events which we take for granted as "nature" are in fact as miraculous as a one-day quantity of oil burning for eight days. To answer the classic question of the Beit Yosef, we can understand the eight days of Chanukah as our declaration and as a revelation of the existence of Divine reality in every aspect of nature, an identity between the one day for which the oil burnt naturally and the seven days when the Menora burnt with no natural explanation. The days of miraculous burning were made possible through the recognition of that inner reality of the natural burning, a reality that truly exists only because of the unification of the Divine with physical matter. This is a reality not apparent when one looks only at the surface, limited to observable nature, represented by the number seven.

So when the Chashmonaim entered the defiled sanctuary, they occupied themselves with repairing it for a full eight days. Eight days were not necessary for the physical-level work that needed to be done. But eight days were necessary to anchor the concepts of an inner reality and spiritual transcendence, so crucial at a time when the world was in the process of adopting a culture that denied anything beyond the natural and observable.

While the lack of pure oil was a circumstance beyond their control, in the inner world of the Divine there are no excuses such as being a "victim of circumstances." Every circumstance is another opportunity to reveal, in some way, the inner Divine reality that encompasses all creation. Purity and holiness are elements of an inner reality. Oil that is tahor, pure, and oil that is tamei, defiled, look the same. The difference lies only in their hidden essence. In this case, lighting pure oil wasn't simply optional, it was a necessity. Nothing less than pure oil could serve to highlight the Jewish emphasis on internal reality, in opposition to the emphasis on the external dimension. What you see is not necessarily what you get. It's what's inside that counts.

We live in a culture of blatant superficiality with an emphasis on externals. This reflects an existence which is limited to the dimensions of nature, based on "seven." Even our Judaism and Torah study can be limited to that external dimension. These things can be meaningful, they can enrich our lives, but if they lack the internal soul and essence, we have lost their uniquely Jewish dimension, based on "eight," which the Chashmonaim fought so valiantly to preserve in the still-ongoing battle with Greek culture.

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