

HISTORY REENACTED

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

Most holidays that the Jewish people celebrate are marked by physical manifestations of our happiness. These types of celebrations are often termed as those "of happiness and feasting." There is always, however, a spiritual counterpart to the celebration. These spiritual manifestations of happiness are often termed as those "of thanks and praise." By the holiday of Chanukah, however, we find that the underlying expressions of our celebratory joy are to be primarily spiritual in nature, that the holiday is "days of thanks and praise." The obligatory physical celebration is lacking.

Rav Shlomo Kluger explains that there is another holiday that shares this feature. If one were to examine the Torah portions concerning the holiday of Shavuos, one will not find any mention of what occurred on that date in history: the giving of the Torah to the nation of Israel at Sinai. Shavuos, according to what is explicitly stated in the Torah, is not celebrated because it is the anniversary of this most significant date. Instead, the holiday is called "Yom HaBikkurim," the day of the first fruits, when a special offering signifying the start of the harvest is brought.

The reason for this is straightforward: the Torah was not given to the nation of Israel to benefit their physical existence. The Torah was given to the nation of Israel for the benefit of their souls, their spiritual existence. Physical expressions of happiness would be a most inappropriate way to recall such an event. However, physical expressions of happiness are called for when celebrating the beginning of the harvest period, when we give thanks for G-d for sustaining us. Therefore, Shavu'os, and its status of a holiday on which happiness and feasting is called for, is associated only with "Yom HaBikkurim," and not the giving of the Torah.

The Bach, on Tur Shulchan Aruch (Orech Chayim 670) writes that by Chanukah, the decrees and troubles that befell the nation of Israel stemmed from the fact that the people became lazy in their service of G-d. Therefore, they were punished by having the Greeks issue an edict that prohibited them from serving G-d at all. They were not allowed to study the Torah or keep its precepts. The Chashmonaim fought against that edict. Ultimately, G-d allowed the Chashmonaim to be victorious in their battles. The nation no longer suffered from the edict against the Torah. Rav Kluger says that Chanukah is actually akin to that very day when the nation of Israel originally received the Torah. Because the nation of Israel was now openly able to accept and embrace the Torah once again, such an event is on par with the original acceptance of the Torah. Just as that occasion is one to be celebrated in spiritual fashion, and not inappropriately with happiness and feasting, so too Chanukah is to be celebrated aptly, with the requisite thanks and praise.

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