

DAYS OF EIGHT

by Rabbi Label Lam

What is Chanukah? The sages learned that on the 25th day of Kislev the days of Chanukah are eight ...(Talmud Shabbos)

Men of Understanding...Days of Eight... (Lyrics to Maoz Tzur)

There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophies
Horatio...(Shakespeare, MacBeth)

The Sfias Emes points out that saying "the days of Chanukah are eight" means much more than some subtle poetic nuance. There's a world of difference between saying, "eight days" and "days of eight". One tells us of the number, the mere quantity of the days while the other tells us about the quality of these days of Chanukah. Somehow they are "days of eight". What does that mean and what does that mean to us?

The Greek civilization presented a competitive culture, which sought to substitute and supplant Jewish life. They offered intellectual rigor, spirited sports, the catharsis of theatre and art. The Jewish Nation was allured to this sister system which was at first friendly and only later proved a poisonous and deadly affair.

While the Greeks were genuinely interested in categorizing and artistically mapping the mathematical beauty and truth of the universe, their vision of reality was by definition limited to the distorted lens of the fleshy human eye and its empirical methodologies.

That the world was a seven-day production, and that we operate within that framework creates a natural boundary for even the most perfect description of reality. Everything experienced is enveloped within the arena of our existence. The logical limits of Greek thought and life was by definition within the reach of "seven".

The word for eight in Hebrew - "Shemonah" - when shuffled as an anagram spells out the word "Neshamah" - the Soul - and also "Mishnah" - the building block of the Oral Torah. Truncate delicately, and we are left with the "Shemen" - Oil, the stuff of the Chanukah miracle and the centerpiece of the celebration.

The Hebrew word for nature is "Teva". "Teva" has two connotations that may help us gain an insight into the nature of nature. "Teva" implies drowning or sinking, because we are sunken into and swallowed up by this physical world.

"Teva" also is related to the word "matbeah" - coin - referring to a coin that has an image impressed upon it. Similarly the natural world impresses; so much so that our senses are so stimulated that any inkling of anything beyond is naturally overwhelmed.

The Hebrew word for "The Natural World", HaTeva, has the same numerical value for the Holy Name - Elokim. Meaning that our definition of nature is actually "repeating miracles." If something happens predictably we call it natural. When it happens once, we call it a miracle. We are alerted, jolted to a super state of awareness, a higher consciousness of reality.

Now the idea of the oil, of eight, of soul, of the Oral Torah, rises and rides high above and beyond the confines of mere nature. Eight encompasses the sphere of seven enriching and extending it. When penetrated it anoints even natural life with a tinge of the miraculous.

Now we come to the crunch, really. The Talmud tells us, "If we are not prophets ourselves, we are at least the children of prophets." Seeming simple activities and customs done by so many holy Jews over so many thousands of years must be packed with profundity, even if we don't perceive it at first. I'm talking about "latkes". I think we can now understand "latkes" - potato pancakes. No joke!

When that potato mix is cooked in oil to be joyfully ingested, we are not engaged in a mere Epicurean exercise. It is rather an expression of how the concept of eight, manifest on Chanukah, can be made to saturate and enrich the ordinary and natural dimensions of our lives.

It's the Oral Torah's authentic recipe of how to mix the oil, to engage the eternal soul, breathing ultimate meaning into every molecule of life. If that lowly potato can be so educated and so dedicated then there is hope for us also to gain much more than just mass quantities of calories, enjoying quality time during these days of eight.

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