

OBTAINING WISDOM

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

God told Moshe, "Speak to Aharon and tell him that when he kindles the Menorah, the seven lamps should illuminate towards the Menorah." (Bamidbar 8:1-2)

This week's parshah begins with the mitzvah of lighting the Menorah, an allusion to Chanukah, says the Ramban. Fascinatingly, it is the eighth chapter of Bamidbar, and the 36th parshah in the Torah, both numbers of Chanukah (Chanukah is 8 days long, during which we light 36 candles). The Mishkan — the Tabernacle — the portable temple that the Jewish people built and used in the desert, was divided into two sections, the Kodesh Kodashim — the Holy of Holies — where the Aron HaKodesh resided, and the Kodesh — the Sanctuary — in which the Menorah, the Lechem HaPanim (Showbread), and Golden Altar were placed, in the south, north, and east respectively.

Said Rebi Yitzchak: One who wants to become wise should turn to the south [when praying], and one who wishes to become rich should turn to the north. Your sign for this is the Table was to the north, and the Menorah to the south. Said Rebi Yehoshua ben Levi: One should always turn to the south, because through obtaining wisdom, he will obtain wealth. (Bava Basra 25b)

Hence, the Menorah is the symbol of wisdom, and being that, it is the map one must follow along his or her journey to wisdom. By understanding the structure of the Menorah, one can understand the path to wisdom, for though knowledge is easily attainable by just about anyone, wisdom is reserved for the special few.

The first thing to point out that the Menorah of the Temple had seven branches, like the days of the week. And, like the days of the week, six of the branches were different from the seventh branch, three being on each side of the middle branch, just as the last three days of the week, and the first three days of the next week, envelope the Shabbos that follows and precedes them.

This is why "Shabbos" is mentioned in each introduction to the Shir Shel Yom — the Psalm of the Day — and why at the end of the "song" for Day Four — Wednesday — we mention the words "Lechu neranana," the first words of Kabbalas Shabbos each week. This indicates that the kedushah of the upcoming Shabbos begins on the fourth day of the week, and it ends at the conclusion of the third day of the upcoming week. Hence, this is the cut-off point for saying Havdalah from Shabbos, and for reviewing the weekly parshah — Shnei Mikrah, Chad Targum — of that Shabbos as well. What's the connection?

The connection is that the acquisition of wisdom is only relevant in this world, which was made in

seven days. For, only in this world is wisdom so necessary for survival, and in order to make good sense of the opportunity of life. And yet, it is so hidden, and because it is, we can use our free-will to pursue it, to acquire it, and to benefit from it along our path to fulfillment: If you want it like money and seek it like buried treasures, then you will understand fear of God and Godly Knowledge you will find. (Mishlei 2:4- 5)

It is a tree of life for those who grasp it. (Mishlei 3:18)

There are 48 ways to acquire wisdom ... (Pirkei Avos 6:6)

In the World-to-Come, there is only Godly knowledge. Indeed, even as early as Yemos HaMoshiach, wisdom stops being an object of pursuit, being a gift from Heaven:

After, The Holy One, Blessed is He, will take His revenge against them, as spoken about in Yechezkel, and the Jewish people will dwell in their land in security and with much good. Da'as — Godly understanding — will greatly increase, as will wisdom and purity. (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 491)

In other words, in Yemos HaMoshiach, the reality of eight begins, which always alludes to the supernatural, as part of the preparation for the World-to-Come. Hence, Chanukah is an eight-day holiday, celebrated with an eight-branch menorah, and it ceases to be a holiday in Yemos HaMoshiach, since at that time everyday will be "Chanukah."

But, the Menorah, as this week's parshah indicates, is only meaningful when it is kindled. After all, it is the olive oil, and the flame that it produces, that is the true symbol of Divine wisdom:

Why olive oil and not nut oil? Because, the olive is the symbol of light to the world. (Tanchuma, Tetzaveh 6)

However, says the Menorah, there is a prerequisite to attaining Divine wisdom: ... the seven lamps should illuminate towards the Menorah.

The three on the east side should have their wicks turned towards the central one, and likewise the three on the west side should have their wicks towards the central one. (Rashi, Bamidbar 8:2)

Just like Shabbos, the central light faces upward, so-to-speak, towards Heaven. The entire point of Shabbos is to remind us at the end of the week, and to inspire us at the beginning of the next week, to remain focused on the fact that everything we are and have comes from God. If what we do does not bring us closer to God, and if this understanding is not the basis of what we plan to do in the upcoming week, then it will not result in true wisdom, as it says:

The secrets of God to those who fear Him. (Tehillim 25:14) This is what the Talmud states as well:

Rabbah bar Rav Huna said: Every man who possesses learning without the fear of Heaven is like a treasurer who is entrusted with the inner keys but not with the outer: how is he to enter? Rebi Yannai proclaimed: "Woe to him who has no courtyard yet makes a gate for the same!" Rav Yehudah said,

"The Holy One, Blessed be He, created His world only that men should fear Him, for it says, 'God has done it, that men should fear Him' (Koheles 3:14)." (Shabbos 31a)

Hence, and this is very important, there is a very big difference between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge is available to just about anyone, but wisdom is available only to those who fear God, to those who place ultimate truth before personal truth. There have been a lot of very smart people throughout history, but enough wise people.

This has been built into Creation, an immutable fundamental of the world we know:

God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and God separated between the light and the darkness. (Bereishis 1:3-4)

He made a separation in the illumination of the light, so that it should not flow or give off light except for the righteous, whose actions draw it down and make it shine. However, the actions of the evil block it, leaving them in darkness, and this itself was the hiding of the light. (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 133)

The Menorah is the symbol of this very idea, which is why it is associated with the Ohr HaGanuz, the Hidden Light of Creation:

The Original Light of Creation was hidden in the 36 candles of Chanukah. (B'nei Yissachar, Kislev)

As to why the Menorah, the symbol of wisdom was placed in the south, it says:

The Menorah is Torah. The Menorah was in the south corresponding to the sun, which is light to the wise man, and to the right, because it says, "The heart of the wise man is on the right" (Koheles 10:2). The Menorah also corresponds to the World-to-Come, where there is only the light of the Shechinah. (Midrash Aggadah)

In this, we have a confluence of two ideas. For, as it is well known, the Jewish people are compared to the moon (Succah 29a), which receives its light from the sun, the representation of God in this scenario. In other words, to be a light unto the nations really means to be reflector of the light of God — Torah — to the nations of the world. Like the moon, the Jewish people have no original light of their own, just the light that God shines on us. Of course, we are not talking about plain knowledge, for there have been plenty of brilliant secular Jews throughout history. However, the only light they were able to receive and understand was of the physical realm, not the spiritual one. Had Einstein not discovered the Theory of Relativity, more than likely, some other physicist would have. The question is, what chiddushei Torah — Torah novellae — would have resulted had Einstein applied his genius to the infinite realm of Torah?

It is a moot question now. However, not with respect to us, if we take all the lessons of the Menorah to heart. Then, we can be recipients of Divine wisdom so sublime that it allows us to rise above the every day mundane reality, and to become partners with God in the fulfillment of the master plan for Creation. And, when we do that, we too emanate light like the Menorah, and illuminate the world in

which we live. Text

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