

MAINTAINING OUR CONNECTION TO GOD

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

When Aharon lights the lamps at evening, he will cause fumes [from the incense]. [It will be a] perpetual incense before God throughout the generations. (Shemos 30:8)

To my knowledge, no one has pointed it out yet, but it is, at the very least, interesting. We know there are allusions to Purim in the Torah, as the Talmud points out (Chullin 139b), and allusions to Chanukah in the Torah, as the Ramban explains at the beginning of Parashas BeHa'alosecha.

However, in this verse, there may be a reference to both holidays in a single verse, since it discusses both the Menorah and the Ketores in one breath, and if this is indeed the case, what insight can be gleaned from this juxtaposition, especially the week before Purim?

The known allusion to Purim in the Torah is recorded in the Talmud:

Where is Mordechai alluded to in the Torah? "[God told Moshe, 'Take the finest fragrances: 500 of] myrrh — mar dror' " (Shemos 30:22-23). (Chullin 139b)

At first, this may seem like a stretch: Mar Dror ... Mordechai ... they sound a little bit alike, but is that the best we can do? Yes, because it is not just the similar sounding names that the Talmud is zeroing in on, but the the connection between Mordechai himself and the incense offering. There were 11 spices used for a reason: The number 11 represents the concept of Da'as — Godly knowledge — and so too did the ketores, and Mordechai. This is why:

... The cycle-length of the sun and moon are not equal, but rather the sun's extends beyond the moon's by 11 days ... The Malchus is missing 11 lights, which are from the 320, 280, and 288 Sparks, which are continuously being rectified until the arrival of Moshiach. Thus, because of these 11 lights that are missing from the Malchus, there are 11 days missing from the lunar calendar with respect to the solar one. (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 300)

Without the necessary background, this quote means almost nothing. The only part that makes sense is that the sun's cycle is 11 days longer than the moon's, but what does that have to do with the Malchus and its 11 missing lights? For that matter, what's a Malchus?

At this point, it doesn't really matter. All that counts right now is that when God made Creation, He held back 11 lights, and because He did, evil can exist and do bad things. Therefore, everything we do is for the sake of rectifying these 11 lights, and perfecting Creation:

Eleven days journey from Chorev to Kadesh Barnea by way of Mt. Seir. (Devarim 1:2).

It says in the Sifri: Had the Jewish people merited the 11 days, they would have entered the land, because the 11 days would have overcome the 11 klipos, which are the 11 chiefs of Eisav. (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 421)

Hence, these unrectified 11 lights are the basis of the 11 chiefs of Eisav, whose descendants have, more than anyone else, been the greatest source of trouble and suffering for the Jewish people. Historically, no nation's da'as has challenged the Jewish people more than Eisav's, and no nation has inflicted as much damage on the Jewish people as his.

Therefore, this 11 represents Eisav's outlook on life, his world-view, his da'as, which blinds him to the Ohr HaGanuz within Creation. He only appreciates Creation for what it can do for him materialistically, resulting in a drive which has brought the world to the brink of destruction many times in the past.

To counteract his da'as, which is negative — negative 11 — one needs positive da'as, and:

There is no da'as except for Torah. (Sotah 49a)

One of the reasons why the ketores represented da'as was because it had to be finely ground before being used. Likewise, to achieve da'as, one must grind down ideas to get to the essence of the concept, without which one can easily err regarding the value or lack of value of a particular idea. It happens all the time. Only the truth is a fitting offering before God, and has the ability to ascend on high, like the fumes of the incense offering, and be pleasing before God.

Mordechai worked the same way, which is why he could see the truth of the situation while everyone else slept. He took in all the information around him, past, present, and future, and processed it, and as a result figured out who Haman was, what he was meant to trigger amongst the Jewish people, and what would happen if they did not respond accordingly. He ground down the situation, so-to-speak, until it was refined enough to piece together the big picture, and that is what drove him while everyone else remained at home shaking in their boots, or capitulating.

That is why Purim was the holiday during which the Jewish people finally accepted the Oral Law with love (Shabbos 88a). The entire Talmudic process is about this, grinding down ideas in search of their essential truths. After the Purim story, the Jewish people came to understand how easily they could be deceived, and how crucial the Oral Law is for making sense of Torah and history, and lovingly accepted it.

The Menorah, the symbol of Chanukah, is also the symbol of da'as:

Rebi Yitzchak said: "If you want to become wise, face south; to become wealthy, face north. This is symbolized by the table which was in the north and the Menorah in the south." (Bava Basra 25b)

The answer is obvious: The light of the Menorah not only represented the Ohr HaGanuz, the Supernal, Hidden Light of Creation, it contained it. In fact, shemen zayis — olive oil — itself

represents the Ohr HaGanuz in Creation:

Why not use nut oil [for the Menorah] instead of olive oil? Because the olive is the symbol of light to the world. (Tanchuma, Tetzaveh 6)

In fact, shemen zayis is compared to Torah:

Torah is compared to oil: Just as oil is bitter at first and then becomes sweet, so too is it with Torah; just as oil is life for the world, so is Torah; just as oil brings light to the world, so too do the words of Torah. (Devarim Rabbah 7:3)

This is why the Talmud says that anyone who uses olive oil on a regular basis will be certain to have children who are talmidei chachamim. Hence, the Menorah, vis-a-vis the shemen zayis that it burns, is also a symbol of da'as.

If so, then why did we need two holidays to celebrate one concept? Did we simply forget the lessons of Purim, and needed Chanukah to remind us of what we forgot? Or, did Chanukah add something to the da'as of Purim, and does so every year? And, is this what the verse alludes to when placing both concepts together?

Purim came at the end of Golus Bavel — the Babylonian Exile — the first one that the Jewish people entered since moving into Eretz Yisroel. Ideally, it should also have been the last exile, for had the entire Jewish people returned to Eretz Yisroel with Ezra, the wellsprings of wisdom would have opened up for the returning Jewish nation, to help usher in the Messianic Era (Zohar 2:9a).

Unfortunately, it didn't happen. Many Jews remained in Bavel, and therefore, the upper wellsprings of wisdom closed up once more, never to open up again until Moshiach finally arrives. Whatever da'as the Jewish people received during the Purim redemption, it remained incomplete, which is why the second temple did not become the final temple, and the attack on the Oral Law began and continued to increase, reaching a feverous pitch during the time of the Greek Exile, when Hellenists became quite powerful. The following dialogue is a clue to what Chanukah provided:

Eliezer ben Po'ira said [to Yanai the king]: The "Chachamim detest you!" Yanai asked, "How can I know?"

Eliezer told him, "Wear the Tzitz (the Kohen Gadol's headplate) and see their reaction."

So, Yanai did this, and Yehudah ben Gedidiah told him, "King Yanai, it suffices that you are king. Do not presume to be a kohen as well."

Yanai was not considered a kosher Kohen, for people said that his mother was captured [before Yanai was conceived, disqualifying her to marry a kohen]. The matter was investigated, and it was not found [to be true]. The Chachamim angrily left the banquet, so Eliezer said, "King Yanai, a commoner may bear such indignity, but not you, a king and Kohen Gadol!" Yanai asked, "What should I do?"

Eliezer answered, "Kill them!"

So, Yanai asked, "But what will happen to Torah?"

Eliezer answered: "The Sefer Torah will remain for anyone who wants to learn."

[Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak] said: "At this point, Yanai became a heretic, since he should have countered 'what will happen to the Oral Torah?' " (Kiddushin 66a)

Unlike the Written Law, the Oral Law depends upon its accurate transmission from generation to generation, especially at that time of history, hundreds of years before the Mishnah was written down, and even longer before there was an official Talmud. Eliminate the Chachamim and the Oral Law dies, God forbid.

Exactly: God forbade it. The world stands on Torah, and Torah stands upon the accurate transmission of the Oral Law. Therefore, God wasn't about to let an egocentric heretical king and his henchman interfere with the transmission of the Oral Law, even though Yanai did murder many of the Chachamim of his time, and forced Torah-true Jews into hiding.

And yet, not only did Torah Sh'b'al Peh — the Oral Law — survive, it has thrived. Eventually it was redacted into the Mishnah, and expanded upon in the Talmud. Orthodox Judaism is alive today, with a core of adherents that maintains the traditions of thousand of years, and is even seeing secular Jews accept the validity of the Oral Law and become Torah-observant, even in such a fast-paced, technologically-advanced, and extremely distracting society. Where does that come from?

The da'as of Chanukah. The experience of Purim gave us the necessary da'as to accept Torah Sh'b'al Peh with a full heart. The experience of Chanukah gave is the ability to maintain that connection, even foster it, and at some points, make it grow. What was it about Chanukah that made that possible, and how was it tied to the Menorah and shemen zayis? What, if any, conscious change did we make at that time that secured the future of the Oral Law?

To answer that question, it would help to understand why the Oral Law is so controversial in the first place, at least more than the Written Law. Obviously, someone who denies the Divine origin of Torah in general will have problems with the Divine origin of the Oral Law. It is about those who accept the Divinity of the Written Law but deny the Sinai origin of the Oral Law that we are ask.

The answer is: Seeing is believing.

Like God Himself, the Oral Law is something that we're told exists, cannot be empirically proven and therefore, must be accepted on faith. Like our own souls, we can only prove its existence by the tracks it leaves. For, just as the existence of the soul is the only explanation for why a body is self-sacrificing for a higher cause against its own survival instinct, likewise is the Oral Law the only explanation for why the Torah commands what it does. The Written Law cries out for an Oral Law. The only question is, which one?

The Chanukah experience added a whole new dimension to our connection to da'as that revealed that, believing is seeing as well. It revealed that if one's starting point is their willingness to believe in the Oral Law, they will, in turn, come to see why it is true. The most powerful example of this was the great Rebi Akiva, himself the son of converts, and later in life, a ba'al teshuvah.

Rebi Akiva said of himself in his pre-teshuvah years:

"If someone would have given me a Torah scholar I would have bitten him like a donkey!" (Pesachim 49b)

However, the Talmud later reports:

Rebi Yehudah said in the name of Rav: "When Moshe went up on high, he found The Holy One, Blessed is He, sitting and tying crowns on the Holy letters. He asked The Holy One, Blessed is He: "Ruler of the Universe, who is holding back Your hand?" The Holy One, Blessed is He, answered: "There is a man who will appear at the end of several generations and Akiva the son of Yosef is his name and he will need these crowns, because from each and every thorn he will derive scores and scores of laws." (Menachos 29b)

Laws that previously did not exist? To find modern day applications of pre-existing principles is one thing, but to either add or subtract from the 613 Mitzvos is forbidden!

When one of Rebi Akiva's students asked him, "Rebi, from where do we know these laws?" he answered, "These are laws learned from Moshe Rabbeinu, from Mt. Sinai."

Then what did Rebi Akiva add that Moshe Rabbeinu had not already given? The source in the Written Law for what is known from the Oral Law. In fact, that is primarily what the Talmud seems to do: Locate the verse in the Torah that alludes to the law that, previously, was only known through the Oral Law, using the ability of drush. As the Arizal explains:

There are four levels [of Torah learning] and the pneumonic is Pardes, which stands for: Pshat — Simple, Remez — Hint, Drush — Exegetical, and Sod — Secret. A person needs to toil in all of them to the extent that he can, and seek out a teacher to teach them to him. If a person lacks one of these four levels relative to what he could have achieved then he will have to reincarnate. (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Ch. 11)

There are strict rules when it comes to using Drush, but success, at least on the level of Rebi Akiva and his colleagues, whose efforts have preserved Torah, particularly the Oral Law, until this very day, depends upon Heavenly help. The type of spiritual vision necessary to darshan out in accordance with Torah, that which is revealed and that which is not revealed, is the result of siyita d'Shemaya — Heavenly help, as the Chashmomain proved when, against all visible odds, they battled the Greeks and their Hellenists followers, and won, on behalf of God, on behalf of the Jewish nation, and on behalf of the Oral Law.

They believed, and therefore they saw beyond what the physical world had to show them. Rebi Akiva became a believer, and as a result, he saw beyond what the physical letters showed him. And, the same has been true for every ba'al teshuvah since then.

In the place that ba'alei teshuvah stand, even righteous people can't stand there. (Brochos 34b)

Hence, the da'as of Chanukah was the completion of the da'as of Purim. Purim showed us the necessity of the Oral Law, and Chanukah showed us how to find out what it is, and how to know what it is not. More importantly, it gave us the intellectual tools to use the Written Law to confirm the Oral Law, so that as exile deepened, and the onslaught against the Oral Law intensified, we had the ability to intensify our relationship and commitment to the Oral Tradition handed down to us from Moshe Rabbeinu himself.

Only when these two levels of da'as work together do we maintain our connection to God's Torah, and as such, it becomes "a perpetual incense before God throughout the generations."

Text

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