

A CHANUKAH READER

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YESHIVA

OF GREATER WASHINGTON

In Loving Memory
לעילוי נשמת

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by his family

A Chanukah Lesson

The Midrash relates that when Yosef ordered his brother Shimon taken as a hostage to ensure that Binyamin would be brought down to Egypt, Shimon responded, "I'll remain your prisoner until my brothers return, but only if you can catch me!" Shimon repelled the efforts of 70 men, until finally Yosef's son, Menashe, who was a mere 7 years old at the time, got up and whacked his uncle over the head. The next morning, when Shimon woke up in prison, he declared "*Maaka Zu BeBais Abba Hayo!*" ("That blow came from my father's house!") It is not possible for anyone, aside from a member of the House of Israel, to do any sort of damage to another member of the family (*Bereishis Raba 42:24*).

The Gemara (Shabbos 21b) poses a seemingly elementary question:

"What is Chanukah? Our Rabbis taught: On the twenty-fifth of Kislev begin the eight days of Chanukah; we may not eulogize on these days nor may we fast on them. When the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oil in the Temple. And when the royal house of the Hashmonian's prevailed and were victorious over them, they searched and found only one vial of oil which still had the stamp of the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) intact, and it contained enough to light for only one day. A miracle occurred and they used this oil to light for eight days. The next year, they fixed this date and made it a festival, celebrated with praise and thanks."

Thus the Gemara states that Chanukah is a commemoration of the miracle of the single flask that lasted for eight days. Yet in our *tefilos* we seem to commemorate an entirely different miracle with the recital of '*Al Hanisim*', which focusses entirely on the miracles of the war against the Syrian-Greeks – "*...the many were delivered into the hands of the few...*". Why did the Gemara choose the miracle of the candles as the main reason that we give thanks to Hashem on 25 Kislev, over the miracle of the Maccabees defeat of the Syrian-Greeks?

As Alexander the Great traveled the known world, taking control of countless countries, Greek philosophy and culture was spread in his wake, along with the superficial charm of Hellenism. When Alexander reached Israel, Shimon Hatzadik, the Kohein Gadol and leader of the Jewish people, came out to greet him. When he saw the great tzadik drawing near to him, he jumped off his horse and prostrated himself before him. The Greek soldiers were baffled. How could their leader, the strongest, most powerful ruler in the known world, humble himself so?

Alexander's secret was revealed; every night before he went out to war, the face of Shimon Hatzadik came to him in a dream and told him that he would be victorious. Because of his great appreciation, admiration and respect for his "guardian angel", Alexander the Great granted Shimon Hatzadik control over Israel, and the ability to continue the theocratic rule. This encounter began a golden era for the Jews. The most powerful man in the world had just bowed down to their leader. They were on top of the world! What happened between Alexander's positive encounter with Shimon Hatzadik, and the subsequent abandonment of the policy of religious tolerance and waging war against us?

Before any Greeks passed anti-Semitic/ anti-Torah legislation, and before battle was waged, many Jews became enamored by Greek culture and philosophy. It was the way of the future. They left their Torah lifestyles for the 'richer' one that Greek culture offered. And even though the other Jews kept a Torah facade, their hearts were torn. Rav Hirsch quotes from Maacabees 2:4:

"Jason (a man formally known as Joshua who bought the position of Kohen Gadol from the Greeks) had the audacity to erect beneath the very Temple Mount, a building intended for gymnastic sport, and to constrain the finest youths to participate in the exercises held there. Through this scandalous and criminal behavior of the godless, and by no means high priestly Jason, the movement towards Hellenism and the impulse to adopt foreign practices became so strong even the Kohanim no longer concerned themselves with the service of the Korbanos; instead, they became contemptuous of the Bais Hamikdosh,, neglected the korbanos, and ran out to participate in the illicit performances of the palaestra at the proclamation announcing the throwing of the discus. Their ancestral dignities they slighted, and the Hellenistic applause seemed to them the highest attainment."

There is much to gain from Greek culture. After Noach cursed Canaan and blessed the G-d of Shem, he said "*May G-d extend Japheth...*" (Bereishis 9:27). We see that there is value to be found in Japheth, the ancestor of Greece. But the verse continues; "*...but he will dwell in the tents of Shem*". Greek philosophy may be beneficial in certain regards, but only when its parameters are set within the Jewish people, and when it is used to enhance Torah. Unfortunately, not all of the Jews during the time of our Chanukah story got this message.

Rav Hirsch continues:

"For you must note that this revolt of which voices of the past have just given an account, this revolt was not one provoked from without; it was not the

consequence of Antiochus' wild attack on Judaism; this revolt of the Jewish teachers of God's Law, and of the upper classes of society in Judea, was voluntary; it preceded the frenzy of the king; it was, strictly speaking, the actual cause, the real origin of the subsequent fanatical anti-Jewish outbreak. Not in his wildest dreams would it have occurred to Antiochus to convert Jews from Judaism to Greek culture, had not Jews and priests of Jewry disclosed to him that Judaism no longer held a first place in their heart, that they were only waiting for the royal command to place Zeus on the altar of the Eternal, and that at the same time the common people, the lower classes, could be easily lured into the other camp—or made to suffer martyrdom if they refused.”¹

In 187 BCE, Seleucus IV succeeded to the throne to the Hellenistic Seleucid Empire; an area that extended from Syria to Babylonia and included the land of Israel. The Kohen Gadol at the time was Chonyo III, a righteous grandson of Shimon HaTzadik. Chonyo attempted to remove corrupt officials who remained in power as holdovers from the time of the *Mochsin*, tax-revenue officials who had murdered and oppressed the Jewish people. One such official was named Shimon. He sought vengeance by informing the local governor, Appolonius, that there was a huge treasury in the Beis HaMikdash, well beyond the actual funds required there. The king subsequently ordered the confiscation of these funds, which were actually held in trust for widows and orphans who had deposited them there for safekeeping. A miracle then occurred in which a divine apparition of a horse and armed rider, accompanied by two soldiers, struck down the lead official. Here we have just one instance of the corrupt Hellenised Jewish faction calling in outside intervention against their brethren.

Seleucus was assassinated in 175 BCE, and succeeded by his younger brother, Antiochus IV – the Antiochus of the Chanuka story. He was an unstable man, given to extremes of excess and cruelty. The Hellenistic Jews, sensing opportunity to regain power, bribed Antiochus to depose Chonyo, and to allow Chonyo's Hellenistic brother, Jason, to assume the holy responsibility and become Kohen Gadol. It was this Jason who (quoted above) built the Greek gymnasium as a vehicle for paganism and licentiousness. Jason's reign as Kohen Gadol was short lived (at least, though, he was a kohen). Three years after his ascension, he made the mistake of sending his tribute to Antiochus in the hands of one Menelaus, a brother of the corrupt tax officer Shimon. Menelaus took the opportunity to out-

¹ Excerpted from Collected Writings of Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (Nanuet, NY: Feldheim Publishers, 1985, 1997 http://www.gatherthepeople.org/Downloads/HIRSCH_CHANUKAH.pdf)

bribe Jason and had Antiochus name him to be the new Kohen Gadol (Menelaus was not a kohen). Menelaus stole the holy golden vessels of the Beis HaMikdash and sold them in order to pay his bribe to Antiochus. Chonyo, the rightful Kohen Gadol, protested, and so Menelaus had him murdered. This controversy caused a war to break out between the two Hellenistic Jews and their supporters over the title of Kohen Gadol. As a tragic end to their controversy, Antiochus came in, killed forty thousand Jews, desecrated the Beis Hamikdash with idols, and began the era of anti-Jewish oppression. The year was 168 BCE.

Decrees were issued that banned the offering of korbanos, and instead ordered that altars would be erected upon which swine would be offered. The Beis HaMikdash was to be converted into a pagan temple. Observance of Shabbos, and holidays, circumcision, the dietary laws, and the laws of family purity was forbidden. All copies of the Torah were to be confiscated and burned. Countless Jews sacrificed themselves *al Kiddush Hashem* when ordered to transgress.

Shortly after, the Greeks came to the town of Modi'in – a little town ten miles or so from Jerusalem – and tried to convince Matisyahu, an elderly man who was a son of Yochanan Kohen Gadol, to sacrifice a pig on an altar. He ardently refused, but another Jew stepped in to perform the service. Matisyahu killed him along with the accompanying Greek party. To save their lives from the vengeance of the Greeks, Matisyahu's family and followers fled to the desert. They were pursued by the enemy, and became leaders of the revolt against oppression. Matisyahu's five sons – Shimon, Yehuda the Maccabee, Elazar, Yochana and Yonasan led the revolt following their father's death. Over the course of the next three years they fought at least five major battles, culminating in the reclaiming of most of the Temple Mount in Kislev of 165 BCE. The profaned altar was dismantled and a new one, along with makeshift vessels, including a menorah made of zinc-coated iron spits, was quickly built. When searching for oil to light the menorah, only one sealed flask of pure oil was found, and thus commenced the miracle.

The wars continued. Huge victories were gained, but losses were suffered as well. At last, in the year 140 BCE, the last surviving brother, Shimon, gained political independence for his people. Throughout all those years, traitorous behavior on the part of unscrupulous Hellenist Jews consistently were a thorn in the side of their fellow Jews.

The Greeks did not initiate the decrees spontaneously against the Jewish people. They did so at the behest of other Jews. They lined up en masse to exchange their old fashioned ways for the futuristic Hellenistic lifestyle, and put their Torah

abiding brothers on the line by involving the Greeks in their business and even persuading them to kill their brothers. It sounds a bit strange that Jews would ask non-Jews to hurt other Jews, but this happens often throughout our history. The Chanukah story is only one of many instances where Jews were the driving force behind so much of our communal and individual hardship.

Hashem gave us a Torah, the only real truth that exists. It is a guiding light that allows for us to clearly see right from wrong, and allows for us to live a life of true freedom and happiness. Hashem also gave us Greek culture to enhance the Torah, “Greek wisdom, after it has acknowledged the divine nature of Torah, will serve to further honor and strengthen the Torah and its ideals.”² It is when Greek culture is seen as mutually exclusive from the Torah that it harms the fibers of mankind.

The P’nei Yehosha explains that Hashem performed the miracle of the oil burning for eight days to let us know that we were once again accepted as his beloved people. We lost our desire for Torah, ran after Hellenism, and brought the Greeks into our national business, and essentially discarded the most precious gift He could give us. Through all that, Hashem still forgave us and took us back with open arms to be his Chosen People.

We must use the Torah as our guide to live in order to seek truth. Assuming that we can draw conclusions separate from Torah will hinder us from ever achieving the most enriched and rewarding life possible. The Ramban writes that even though the Chashmonaim were righteous, and without them Torah and Mitzvos would have been lost forever, they sinned when they went against Yaakov Avinu’s decree that “the staff of monarchy shall not depart from Yehudah” (Bereishis 49:10) and they were wiped out because of it. There were many legitimate reasons for the Chashmonaim to believe that they should rule Israel. They might have even been the only ones suitable for the job at the time, but that is of no consequence. Hashem is always in the right; if something is written in the Torah, it is true regardless of the rationalizations that man can make. It takes a life time’s work to achieve the constant realization that the Torah knows what is best for us. So as we strive to achieve this goal, let us listen to the timeless message that the shevet Shimon was trying to teach us: *Maaka Zu BeBais Abba Hayo!*

² Rav Kook, Silver From the Land of Israel pg. 109-111

Going all the Way

By Arieh Rosenberg, Yeshiva Gedolah, Yeshiva of Greater Washington

Rabbi Menachem Nachum Twersky of Chernobyl, founder of the famed Hasidic dynasty of Chernobyl, writes (in *Me'or Einayim*)³ that whenever the time of a mitzvah comes, it is not merely a remembrance of an event, but during that time we have access into the world of that mitzvah or holiday. For instance, on Pesach when *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* took the Jewish people out of Egypt, each year during the time of Pesach we each have a special strength and potential that could enable us to break out of our personal constrictions and limitations.

The same principle applies on Chanukah. Chanukah occurred at a very dark spiritual time. The Jewish people no longer had *nevuah* (prophecy), the vast majority of Jews were assimilated, and even after they re-conquered the Bais Hamikdash they still continued to fight a long and bloody war with the Greeks. Even during those dark times, *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* showed *Klal Yisrael* through the *nisim* of Chanukah that even if we are in the lowest of places, we are beloved to him and that he is willing to lower himself down to us in order to bring us back to him. So too, on every Chanukah, *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, so to speak, lowers himself down to those in spiritual darkness and helps them return to him.

With the above-mentioned understanding of Chanukah, we can explain several seemingly perplexing halachos of Chanukah. The Gemara in Sukkah⁴ states that the *Shechinah* – divine presence – never descends below ten *tefachim* (handbreadths), yet on Chanukah the preferred height for lighting the Menorah is beneath ten *tefachim*⁵. The reason for this is that on Chanukah, Hashem descends below ten *tefachim* – even though he does not during the rest of year – in order to bring back even those people who seem distant to him and are ‘beneath ten *tefachim*.’ Also, the Gemara in Shabbos⁶ states that the wicks and oils which we cannot light on Shabbos (these are generally materials that do not burn well or are deficient in some way), may be used to light the Chanukah candles. The *Meor Eynayim* comments that the wicks and oils that we cannot light with on Shabbos symbolize those Jews who the light of Shabbos does not reach. Yet on Chanukah, we even light these wicks and oils in order to show that on Chanukah the *Shechinah* even reaches those distant Jews who the light of Shabbos does not

³ Me'or Einayim, Parshas Miketz

⁴ Sukkah 5a

⁵ Shabbos 21b, Shulchan Aruch:Orach Chaim: 671:6

⁶ Shabbos 21b

reach. Similarly, Rabbi Yisrael of Koznitz - the Maggid of Koznitz – notes in *Avodas Yisrael*⁷ that one reason why the ideal location to light the Chanukah candles is on the entrance to one's house from the *outside* in order to show that even a place that seems *outside* and distant to *kedusha*, the light of Chanukah reaches.

In order for us to take advantage of this far-reaching Divine Presence in the world, we must take an active approach. Rav Dessler⁸ writes that in order for us to overcome our *yetzer ha'rah* – evil inclination – we need to take an approach called '*Ein Brierah*' – roughly translated as “there is no alternative”. This means that if there are spiritual obstacles in our life, we must do all that we can in order to overcome those obstacles. Once we do all that we can to fight these challenges, then we can get *siyata d'Shmaya* – help from God – and succeed in ways that seem beyond nature. This approach of '*Ein Breirah*' – of fighting challenges, even when *al pi teva* (according to the laws of nature) it seems impossible, is the reason why the Chashmonayim merited miracles that seemed beyond nature. In spite of being weaker, and outnumbered by the Greeks, they still chose to fight against the Greeks. Also, even though they had only one day's worth of pure oil and it would have taken them eight more days to get more pure oil, they still chose to light the Menorah. Since they did all that they could, even though it seemed impossible according to nature, Hashem, in turn, bestowed them with a miracle that was above nature.

On Chanukah, *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* lowers himself down to each person – even if they seem distant to him – in order to bring them back to him. During this time of year, we can take advantage of this far-reaching Divine Presence by following the approach of '*Ein Breirah*' – that even if a challenge seems impossible to overcome according to nature, then that is the challenge we should *davka* try to overcome with all of our power. This is what the Chashmonayim did in order to merit the miracles of Channukah, and with Hashem's help the same should happen to each of us.

⁷ *Avodas Yisrael*, Derush Li'Chanukah

⁸ *Michtav Me'Eliyahu*, Chelek Bais, Chanukah.

We wish the entire community

a Chanukah full of light and joy!

YESHIVA

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