

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF HANUKKAH

We all know the story of Hanukkah. In summary: the Greeks passed laws outlawing fundamental Jewish practices and the Jews in return revolted, fought and ultimately overcame the strongest army in the world. They later found one jar of oil in the temple which was still pure following the Greek desecration of it and miraculously that jar of oil which was supposed to last no longer than a day, lasted for eight. But there is much more to it than that.

In Jewish literature, the Greeks are referred to as darkness; this is because Hashem and Torah always represent light and being that the Greeks came to take away that light they are referred to as darkness. This is why the battle between the Macabbees and the Greeks which lasted 13 years came to an end at a time when darkness just begins to give in to daylight (in the depth of winter). That is, as mentioned before, Chanukah is the time when daylight begins to increase and night time decrease. This is the deep reason why the Maccabees were victorious at that time.

Looking deeper into the number 13 we see that it is also significant. The Greeks believed in many gods while the Jewish people believed in only one God. The number 13 always represents unity in Judaism and in Hebrew. The word ECHAD which means one in Hebrew adds up to 13 and the word AHAVAH which means love adds up to 13; because after all love is the ultimate coming together of two opposites to merge into one. Furthermore we can see that there are twelve shevatim (tribes) and the thirteenth is their unity. There are 12 lines in a cube and the thirteenth which is the cube itself. A boy becomes bar mitzvah at age 13 and a girl at age 12. Girls become bat mitzvah at 12 because they have the special ability to bring together those 12 parts themselves and therefore do not need the extra year which represents their unity. Hence the number 13 is very significant as well.

In the duration of Chanukah we light 36 candles (excluding the shamash). The deep reason for this is rooted in Bereishit and the root of creation. We know that when Hashem created the world and said on the first day "let there be light" that this light was not referring to the light from the sun. This is for the simple fact that the sun and moon were not created until the fourth day. The commentaries derive from here that this special light was a supernal light which Adam lost after he sinned. However, it was present for 36 hours, 12 hours on Friday and 24 hours of Shabbat. Even though Adam sinned before Shabbat this light remained in honor of Shabbat. As a side note this is why we light the Havdalah candle on Saturday night. It is because it was at this time that the supernal light went away and Adam felt the darkness of the world and thereby lit fire for the very first time.

Of course we all have to keep in mind that light and darkness here are symbolic. Light is closeness to Hashem and his revelation in the world while darkness is the lack of closeness to Hashem and lack of his revelation in the world. Therefore, according to the Rokeach (early commentary on the Torah) on Hanukah we light 36 candles to commemorate the 36 hours that Hashem's presence was obvious and glorious in the world. The original light did not only reveal things physically, rather it revealed the

essence and the source of everything. When one saw an apple with the help of this light, the apple did nothing but reveal the greatness of Hashem. As a result there was never a doubt in what is right and what is wrong and obviously never a doubt in the existence of Hashem.

However, once Adam ate from the tree the light was transformed to a mere physical light which instead of revealing Hashem hid his presence altogether. Incidentally this is why it says in the Torah that originally Adam was clothed in or (which when spelled with an aleph means light in Hebrew) and after he sins it says that Hashem clothed him with "Or" (spelled with an ayin means skin in Hebrew). Originally Adam was clothed in that supernal light. He was nothing but a tool which revealed Hashem. Just like light reveals its surroundings, Adam who was clothed in the special light revealed Hashem in its surroundings. However, once he sinned his body no longer spoke of Hashem because it no longer had that light. Therefore, he felt shame and had to be covered. This is an example of their beauty of the Hebrew language. Whenever a word changes from being spelled with an aleph to being spelled with an ayin it represents a descent into the physical and lowlier world. Hence "or" with an aleph means light which reveals what's on the inside while "or" with an ayin means skin which covers and does not reveal. (Another example of this is that in English we have a saying that money does not bring happiness. Well in Hebrew the words say it themselves. "osher" spelled with an aleph means happy and "osher" spelled with an ayin means rich. Hence they are opposites.)

Perhaps now we can understand the Midrash that says the roots of Hanukah started with Adam. After Adam sinned he thought the world would soon come to an end and by seeing daylight decrease and night time increase in the depths of winter he thought the process would continue until there would be no more light and ultimately no world left. However, Hanukah was the transition period between increasing darkness and increasing daylight. Upon seeing that daylight was increasing Adam lit candles for a period of seven days.

The candles are there to remind us that we took away that light and therefore it is our job to light the candles and more practically reveal Hashem in a world where the darkness does not allow him to be seen. What we must keep in mind is that the darker it is the more precious one candle is. As the Gemara puts it "what good is a candle at noon?" We must therefore try our best and to light up the world with Torah and Mitzvot and beezrat Hashem bring the world closer to the bringing of Moshiach bimhera beyamenu.

### **A Deeper Look**

The kabbalists say that the candles contain within them all the mysteries of the world. In fact they say that by looking at the Hanukah lights one can transform him/herself and understand the deepest secrets of the world. While we are certainly not on the level to understand these things lets try to touch the surface and perhaps get an idea of how many deep ideas are behind the simple candles that we light.

The Vilna Gaon says that the word Nefesh (the part of the soul that connects the physical to the spiritual) is an acronym for Ner-light Petil-wick and Shemen- oil. The obvious question is what is the connection between the two? To answer this question we

have to see where in the torah we see such a miracle as that of Chanukah i.e. something burning but not being consumed. By the burning bush that was revealed to Moshe Rabbeinu we see that the bush was burning however it was not being consumed. Similarly on Hanukah the oil lasted for 8 days and the wick did not get consumed. The connection between the human soul and the Hanukah lights is as follows. Oil in kabbalistic terms always refers to wisdom of Torah (that's the deep reason why we say the Moshiach will be anointed with oil in fact Moshiach literally means anointed with oil). Light as we mentioned before refers to Hashem's revelation in the world while the wick represents the human being. The wick draws up the oil and through it keeps the flame on. The wick can not last without the oil and without the oil there would be no light. Similarly the human being must draw up the oil which is torah wisdom and use it to keep the fire which is Hashem's revelation in the world going. This is one of the many messages of the burning bush and one of the many messages of the light, wick and oil.

Another great kabbalistic master, the Baal Shem Tov, explains that there is something to learn from all the different aspects of the physical world. Therefore let's try to look at what we can learn from the lights of Hanukah. We know that the way we perceive colors is through light rays that are reflected back towards our retinas. For example the reason why something looks blue is because that absorbs all the other colors from the white light (which has all the colors) which is shined on it and it reflects back the color blue. We can learn from here that it is what a person gives back that makes him who he is and not what he absorbs and takes in for himself. This is why light reveals only that which is reflected back. The way we ultimately look in the eyes of Hashem is analogous to the way light reveals physical things. Hashem sees us according to what we give out to the world and not what we absorb and take in for ourselves.

Another thing we can learn from the lights of Hanukah is a lesson in not giving up. Fire is unique in that whichever way you turn it, it will always go up. This was the story of the Jews on Hanukah. They were being spiritually slaughtered by the strongest army in the world. Everything seemed hopeless. However, just like the fire never goes down the Jews did not give up. They picked up their weapons and fought for their spiritual existence. Kohanim who had never picked up a weapon in their lives, defeated the strongest army in the world. It is interesting to note that on Purim when the Jews were physically threatened they fought back spiritually (by praying and fasting) and did not even prepare to fight. However on Hanukah when only their spiritual existence was jeopardized they felt the need to fight is physically. The reason for this comes from Chazal who say "hakol bidei shamayim chos meyirat shamayim" this means everything is in the hands of heaven except the fear of heaven. When the Jews were threatened on Purim they knew it was all in Hashem's hand so they turned to him for help. However on Hanukah when their spirituality was threatened, they had to fight because that is not in the hands of heaven.

Another lesson we can learn from the lights of Hanukah relates to the make-up of white light. When all the colors of light are mixed they turn the color white which represents purity and holiness while when all colors of paint are mixed they turn the color black which does not represent a desirable trait. What can we learn from here? What is the difference between colors of light and colors of paint? The answer is that light exists to reveal other things while paint exists to cover other things or to reveal its own beauty.

As humans if we remain selfish we will be as black as the colors of paint while if we try to help others reveal their own potential and ultimately reveal Hashem in the world then we can turn as pure as the color of white.

### **Why 8 days?**

This is perhaps the most popular question that is asked on Chanukah. Why do we celebrate it for 8 days? After-all wasn't there enough oil for the first day? Then why is the first day considered as part of the miracle. Before we get into some interesting answers, it should be noted that there is a book which actually lists 100 answers to this question!

Let's just cover some of the basic answers and hopefully learn something new together.

1) The first day is celebrated because we won the war. We must keep in mind that although we were greatly outnumbered we still ended up defeating one of if not the most strong army in the world at the time.

2) The very finding of that one jar of oil was a miracle and that is celebrated on the first day.

3) The number eight in Hebrew numerology always represents going beyond physical. Seven is always the world of the natural. For example there are seven primary colors of the rainbow, seven notes of music, seven days of the week, seven fruits of Israel, seven days of shiva berachot, and being that 8 follows seven it always represents going beyond the physical. For example a Brit Mila is performed on the eight day and Hanukah is therefore 8 days. Incidentally the Hebrew word for eight (shemonah) is from the root of the word "shemen" which as we mentioned before means oil and represents Torah wisdom. Rav Dessler says it is only fitting to do the Mitsvah of Hanukah which represents going beyond the physical for eight days and with oil because as mentioned before the two words for "oil" and "eight" in Hebrew are related and both allude to going beyond as well. Furthermore the word "shemona" can also be rearranged to read "neshama" which is the third part of the soul which goes beyond the physical and touches on the spiritual which can be further rearranged to read MISHNAH. The depth of this is beyond words. In Hebrew the words literally speak for themselves.

4) The last reason I want to mention is perhaps the most important one to keep in mind. As Jewish people it is our obligation to see nature as a work of g-d. Although it is hard we must always know that nature does not run itself, Hashem always runs everything. In fact it says that for a person to be on the level where he can do miracles he has to completely detach himself from the idea of nature. For example if he drops his pen and it goes up rather than down he should not be surprised the least bit, because Hashem runs the world and not the laws of nature. None of us today are at that level however the reason why we celebrate the first day is that the very burning of oil is a miracle and for us as Jews the natural is as miraculous as the unnatural.

Incidentally this is why we call the Pesach meal and ceremony, "seder" (meaning order). If we think about it the exodus from Egypt was anything but orderly. The natural order of the world was changed dramatically from miracle to miracle and plague to plague; so why do we call it a seder? It is for the same

reason mentioned before. As Jews we not only see miracles as being done by G-d but the orderly is also done by G-d hence the seeming chaos in the natural order of the world during the exodus was for us as orderly as a leaf falling from the tree to the ground.

### **Hanukah Today**

I want to end with a quote from an article that was printed in an Israeli Newspaper a while ago. The story is as follows:

A young boy asks his father: were the Maccabees religious?

Father: yes.

Son: did they keep Shabbat?

Father: yes.

Son: Did they keep the Torah and Mitzvot?

Father: yes.

Son: father do we keep Shabbat?

Father no

Son: do we keep the Torah and Mitzvot?

Father: no.

The son then emphatically asks if the war between the Greeks and the Maccabees was today WHOSE SIDE WOULD WE BE ON?

It is ironic that one of the most widely celebrated holiday by the non-religious Jewish community is Hanukah which celebrates the Jewish victory in its ever-eternal war against secularization!

In the current time that we are living in almost all our cultures are somehow based on the cultures and ideas introduced by the Greeks and Romans. For example the idea of violence for entertainment was introduced by the Greeks in the forms of gladiators and nowadays some of the most popular movies are action movies. How are we any different than the Greeks who watched real gladiators duke it out? The only difference is that we have the technology to fulfill this absurd desire for violence and death by other means. Need I go on?

Why do we enjoy going out at night and not day? This is also a Greek idea. The Rambam refers to the Greeks as darkness, in fact this is the reason why Chanukah and our victory over the Greeks is in winter time when darkness is longest in the year. The Greeks loved darkness because light is regarded as god. Are we not the same?

Why is the number 13 bad luck? I am sure many Jewish people believe in this too. Well in fact Chanukah is where this myth was created. The battle between the Maccabees and the Greeks lasted 13 years and although we were greatly outnumbered we prevailed. In fact as mentioned before in Jewish mysticism the number 13 is actually a very good number it represents unity; the word "echad" adds up to 13 and the word "ahava" which means love adds up to 13. This is why the Greeks resented it so much. They believed in a world of many gods and powers while we believed in unity which is represented by the number 13. However, we are so influenced by the Greek ideas that we automatically think 13 is bad.

We all know that Noah's three sons were named shem Cham and yafet however we often overlook the significance of their names. Cham means hot from him came the

nations which were deeply engulfed in physicality. Yafet comes from yofi which means beautiful. From him came the Greeks Romans and Western culture in general. This beauty that we have been describing is only outer beauty. Perhaps this is why the Greeks were the founders of art for arts sake and the worshipping of the human form through body building to the extreme and performing naked in the Olympic Games. Lastly there is Shem; Shem means name. The essence of a thing is in its name. The Jewish people come from Shem. This is why Jewish culture has always put emphasis on seeing god through the beauty of the world as opposed to the art for arts sake motto. The Greeks introduced the idea of putting outer beauty before inner beauty and valuing it most. And the Romans perfected this idea.

Perhaps a story from the Talmud will demonstrate this point more elegantly. A princess from the Roman emperor asks Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chanania how can there be so much wisdom in such an ugly body as yours? Rabbi Yehoshua answers where does your king keep his wine? She answers in bottles. So he asks why does he not keep them in gold jars? So she goes and orders that all the wine be put in gold jars. After a while all the wine goes sour and is ruined. The point is that when the vessel is more valuable than what it is supposed to hold then the vessel ruins what it is supposed to ultimately protect.

It is important to note that Judaism is not against physicality. In fact the reason that we mark the beginning of our holidays by drinking wine is that it is a mix of physicality and spirituality. The essence of having holidays is to lift our physical activities to the level of the spiritual. A persons spiritual level gets better with time (if he/she works on his/herself), however all physical things get worse with time. The only exception is wine. Wine is a physical entity which gets better with time thus symbolizing the mixture of the physical and spiritual. The saying is you are what you eat. In this case it is also you are what you drink. Physically what you eat or drink becomes a part of you and we hope that by keeping this in mind the unique characteristic of wine being able to mix the physical with the spiritual will become a part of us as well.

Wine is unique in that it can only be kept in a glass bottle. Glass is inherently a vessel that reveals its contents. Therefore we too should only immerse ourselves in physicality to the point where spirituality is visible. Beyond that physicality is like the vessel which ruins the content and itself. This idea is beautifully symbolized in a Jewish wedding where a glass vessel is broken representing the fact that the relationship which is being formed is not even based on the vessel that reveals (glass). Rather it is based on its contents in this case being the wine (representing the inner beauty of the heart) which both the bride and groom drink on their wedding night. (It must be noted that the primary reason for the breaking of the glass is to commemorate the destruction of the temple and to remember we can never be fully happy until it is rebuilt.)

The difference between Jewish philosophy and Greek philosophy is that Jewish philosophy cherishes the spiritual and uses the physical as a vessel while the Greeks cherish the vessel and discard its primary contents which is spirituality. Unfortunately in today's society the majority of us are more Greek than Jewish in this regard.

To conclude I just want to demonstrate how far this adoption of Greek culture has gone. As we know the Olympics were a big part of the culture of the Greeks. They were the ones who invented it. In fact according to many they were the ones who invented competitive sports altogether. We also know that the war between the Maccabees and the Greeks was ideological in the sense that the Maccabees did not want to accept Greek

culture in any shape or form. The irony is that the state of Israel now has its own Olympic games which it calls The Maccabean Games!

Our culture speaks for itself. Be ezrat hashem, with the help of G-d this Hanukah we can have a deeper understanding of what the battle really was and why the Maccabees gave up their lives to protect us from the Greek culture which is still with us even till today. Hopefully with this we will be able to tell our children exactly whose side we are on. Furthermore, Beezrat Hashem this Hanukah when we light those small candles which seem insignificant, we can keep our minds on the fact that a small light in a deep darkness is beyond priceless. If one candle can light up a room then certainly together we can light up the world and thereby help bring the coming of Moshiach bimhera beyameinu.

Happy Hanukah!

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