



JUDAISM FOR LIVING SERIES

CHANUKAH: FINDING YOUR INNER LIGHT WITHIN THE DARKNESS

SOURCE AND DISCUSSION SHEET



We all know the Chanukah story, a small ragtag group of ultra-religious Jews who stood up against the mighty Greek Empire and defeated them in miraculous fashion, culminating in the famous miracle of the oil. One jug of pure oil with the capacity to remain lit for one day, lasted instead for eight.

The Fight with the Greeks

Let's look at the way the story is captured in the Al Hanissim (For All the Miracles) prayer for Chanukah:

SOURCE 1: *Al Hanissim (For All the Miracles) Prayer in Siddur for Chanukah*

In the days of Matisyahu the son of the High Priest, the Hasmonean, and his sons; when the evil Greek Kingdom rose up against Your Nation Israel to make them forget Your Torah and to turn them away from the statutes of Your Will; You, in Your abundant mercy, stood by them in their time of distress. You defended their cause, You judged their grievances, You avenged their cause. You delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the diligent students of Your Torah. And You made Yourself a great and sanctified Name in Your world. And for Your people, Israel, You performed a great deliverance and redemption unto this very day.

Afterwards, Your sons entered the Holy of Holies of your Abode, cleaned Your Temple, purified Your Sanctuary, and kindled lights in Your holy Courtyards, and designated these eight days of Chanukah to thank and praise Your Great Name.

People have a misconception that the Maccabees (Hasmonean Family), who led the rebellion against the Greeks were trained to be mighty warriors. They were actually Jewish Priests more fitting to serve in God's holy Temple than being on the battlefield.

Question: Why do you think it was the Cohanim – Jewish Priests – and not another group of Jews that led the rebellion against the Greeks?

Question: Do you think they believed that they could actually defeat the superpower of the day?

It appears that they were willing to lay it all on the line, to risk their lives to be Jewish and to serve God without interference. No other group cared as much about our tradition as they did, so despite the fact they were the most religious, and in the worst position to take up the fight, they couldn't abide by the destruction of our connection to God and His Torah.

SOURCE 2: *R. Mattisyahu Salomon, Matnas Chaim p. 60*
On the Al HaNissim Prayer for Chanuka

Of course the fact that the weak conquered the mighty and the few conquered the many was a wondrous miracle, but what is miraculous about the impure falling into the hands of the pure, and the evil into the hands of the righteous and the immoral into the hands of those who toil in Torah?

...It can be said that our Sages were coming to teach how the miraculous victory of the few over the many came about – it was **ONLY** because the Hasmoneans were pure, righteous, and toiled in Torah (that they merited this miracle).

It was precisely because they were righteous that they undertook the mission. Their willingness to go beyond their “natural drive for self-preservation” to a state of total self-sacrifice prompted God to perform a miracle that was similarly beyond the realm of natural explanation.

The Rededication of the Temple

The high point of the story is when the Maccabees liberate the Temple and look for oil to once again resume the lighting of the Menorah. They find only one pure jug of oil, and though according to Jewish law they could have lit with impure oil, they wanted to do this mitzvah in the best possible manner.

Question: Is there a connection between how the Maccabees approached the war and how they approached the mitzvah of lighting the Menorah? What was it?

In both instances, they went beyond the natural, beyond what normal convention would dictate, and with commitment and self-sacrifice, refused anything less than total dedication to God.

Consider the miracle; oil enough for one day, burns for eight days.

Question: Do You see the uncanny symmetry between what prompted the military victory and what prompted the miracle of the lights?

In both instances, total dedication to God and His service prompted an impossible military victory and an impossible miracle of the oil, far exceeding its own natural limitations.

The Mitzvah of Lighting the Menorah for the Generations

Jews everywhere, of all denominations, commemorate Chanukah the same way: By lighting the eight-branched candelabra known as the Menorah, one light on the first day, and increasing until the culmination of eight lights on the eighth day of the holiday. What you might not know is the mitzvah of lighting the Menorah was established by the Rabbis with various ways in which to light:

SOURCE 3: Talmud Tractate Shabbos 21:b Mitzvah of Candlelighting

The Rabbis taught: The basic mitzvah of lighting the Chanukah menorah is one candle for a person and his home. A more beautiful way to do this mitzvah is to light one candle for each member of the household. The School of Shammai said that the most beautiful way to perform the mitzvah is to light eight candles on the first day of Chanukah and decrease [on each successive night]; and the School of Hillel said to light one candle on the first night and increase [on each successive night].

מצות חנוכה נר איש וביתו
והמהדרין נר לכל אחד ואחד
והמהדרין מן המהדרין בית
שמי אומרים יום ראשון
מדליק שמנה מכאן ואילך
פוחת והולך ובית הלל
אומרים יום ראשון מדליק
אחת מכאן ואילך מוסיף והולך

The Talmud tells us the very best way to do the mitzvah is to light one menorah starting with one candle and working up to eight on the eighth day. And in our times, this is the accepted practice.

As a matter of fact, many families light multiple Menorahs, each with eight candles on the last night.

No other mitzvah in Judaism has this multi-tiered approach to fulfilling it.

Question: Why do you think the Rabbis built this layered structure into the mitzvah of lighting the Menorah?

While you ponder that, let's look at another interesting section of the same page of Talmud:

SOURCE 4 A/B: Talmud Tractate Shabbos 21:b and Rashi Where to Light the Menorah

4a. The mitzvah of the Chanukah light is to place it on the outside at the entrance of one's home.

נר חנוכה מצוה להניחה על
פתח ביתו מבחוץ

4b. Rashi. The placement of the menorah is designed to publicize the miracle.

רש"י משום פרסומי ניסא

We see from the continuation of the Talmud that the lighting is performed outside of one's home.

Question: If the mitzvah was meant to be for the members of the household as we saw above in source 3, why is the menorah to be lit outside of the home?

Consider the famous explanation provided by Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (Rashi) above in 4b: We light outside to publicize the miracle.

Question: If publicizing the miracle (pirsumei nisa) is the goal, why don't we move the mitzvah from the house and perform it all together in the public square, to publicize the miracle in the greatest way possible?

Before answering our open questions, let's add one more odd wrinkle to the mix:

SOURCE 5: *Code of Jewish Law- Shulchan Orech (Orech Chaim) 673:2*

The lighting accomplishes the commandment; therefore, if one extinguished it before its minimum time had passed, he is not bound to relight it. Even if he extinguished it on the Eve of Sabbath before accepting the Sabbath, when it is still daytime, he is not bound to relight it.

הדלקה עושה מצוה לפיכך אם
כבתה קודם שעבר זמנה אין
זקוק לה ואפילו כבתה בערב
שבת קודם קבלת שבת שעדיין
הוא מבעוד יום אינו זקוק לה

Question: If the goal is to broadcast the mitzvah as much as possible, shouldn't we be obligated to relight the flames if they go out before the mandated half-hour is concluded? Why do you think that's not the case?

Perhaps, the idea of "publicizing the miracle" is not just about the light, but rather about every Jew expressing his/her commitment to God through the "act of lighting his menorah" outside of his home.

This is the message we are publicizing, and that other Jews in the neighborhood will then see -- dedication and commitment to Judaism and to God.

Question: Do you see any connection between the actions of the Maccabees and how the Rabbis structured the lighting of the Menorah?

They made a singular commitment to God and Torah, which stood as a beacon of inspiration throughout the generation. The candlelighting was modeled after the Maccabees themselves!

Now we are ready to answer the first question we asked about the various levels in performing the mitzvah:

Question: Why is the mitzvah of lighting the menorah the only one in which we offer multiple ways to perform it, one more beautiful than the next?

Although we can fulfill the mitzvah with just one candle, we are meant to be all in on this mitzvah, on our commitment and relationship to God, and to publicize "this commitment" to the world. It's this unshakeable dedication to our God and our faith, that in the end prompts the miracle. When we dedicate ourselves in a way that goes beyond our comfortable natural boundaries, God acts in kind. How else would it be possible for our tiny nation to consistently "punch above our weight", forever blowing away our natural limitations, (even causing hatred against us beyond any parallel known in human history)?

The Name Chanukah:

One explanation for why the Rabbis named the holiday Chanukah, comes from the fact that they rededicated the Temple (Chanukat HaBayit) and resumed lighting the Menorah after defeating the Greeks. Chanukah teaches us, in the darkness of the winter, to get out of our natural comfort zones and rededicate ourselves to our Heritage.

This is the opportunity that is placed before each one of us this Chanukah: To commit to something more in our Judaism, to get past our natural limitations and then let God work His miracles!

Question: What small step can you take this Chanukah to demonstrate your dedication to God and His Torah, and the Jewish People?

There is currently a lot of darkness out there and our People are up against countries and resources which threaten to overwhelm us. But the miracle of the Chanukah light teaches us that in the end, if we stick together and dedicate ourselves to our tradition, it will be our light that pushes away all the darkness and will be left standing when all our enemies perish.

As it says in the candle-lighting prayer, "Blessed are you the Lord, God who has done miracles for our ancestors, in those days, in this time."

Our Rabbis tell us that the phrase "in this time", doesn't only mean in this time of year. It also alludes to a promise that God will save us "in our present times", just like He saved us "in those days" of Chanukah! May we merit to see this salvation now, before our very eyes!