

Collected Insights into Chanukah

Shine Brightly

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The light of Chanukah, *chag haurim*, as manifested in the lighting of the candles of the Chanukah, is a central symbol of the holiday. It is this special light which provides illumination during the longest nights of the calendar year. Our rabbis have equated light with the Torah and mitzvot, “*ki ner mitzvah v’torah or*” (*Mishlei* 6:23). In the story of Chanukah, it is the miracle of the oil, used for lighting the menorah, which symbolically represents the return of the nation to its spiritual roots and a renewed dedication to Hashem’s Torah and mitzvot, as sharply contrasted with the efforts of the Greeks to force our neglect of the Torah and observance of mitzvot.

The lighting of candles and the spreading of light is seen in similar fashion in Tanach. Two examples that the Midrash highlights from the time of our early prophets relate to the husband of Devorah, the prophetess, and the grandfather of King Shaul. Both of these figures were rewarded for their “luminary” contributions to the Jewish nation.

Devorah is referred to as *ishet lapidot* (*Shoftim* 4:4). Rashi says that this name refers to the fact that Devorah’s husband made wicks for the mikdash. The Midrash in *Eliyahu Rabbah*, 9, asks why Devorah was chosen for greatness and prophesy when she lived among others, such as Pinchas, who were also capable of leading the people. The Midrash answers that Devorah encouraged her husband, a man ignorant in Torah matters, to make wicks for use in the *mishkan* in Shiloh. Her motive for encouraging him in this matter was to create a manner in which he too could merit a place in *olam habah* and be considered among the righteous. It is through light that even a commoner can have access to the spiritual realm. The Midrash continues that he fashioned thick wicks so that the light of the menorah would shine brightly, and they are therefore referred to as *lapidot*, torches. Hashem responded in turn, and said that due to their efforts to increase light in the mikdash, they would be repaid by Hashem increasing their “light” and influence among the twelve tribes of Israel.

Rabbi Yehuda Leib Ginsberg, author of *Mussar Haneviim*, and a former rabbi in the Jewish community of Denver, CO, expands on this idea. The story of Devorah’s husband serves as testimony that every person has a stake in the wisdom of the Torah and has the ability to rise to high levels of spirituality. Lapidot involved himself in a seemingly inconsequential mitzvah, put his full effort into this mitzvah, and as a result, merited greatness and recognition for all generations. This serves as encouragement to all Jews to find their place and make their unique

contribution in the realm of Torah.

In *Vayikra Rabbah*, 9, the matter of Shaul's kingship is discussed and we are told that it was through the merit of his grandfather that Shaul ascended to the throne. His grandfather lit candles for the masses by illuminating the dark passages between his house and the *beit midrash*, thereby enabling others to participate in Torah learning. This is why in *Divrei Hayamim I* (9:33), the father of Kish, Shaul's father, is referred to as Ner, a candle, and not by the name Aviel which is used in the book of *Shmuel I* (9:1). The Midrash refers to this as a mitzvah that could have been done by anyone and did not require special talents or intellectual capacity.

By providing light to the public, each of these figures reached the highest of levels. In the case of Devorah, she attained prophesy, and in the case of Shaul, he attained kingship. In regards to Shaul, his grandfather's merit was transferred to his progeny, while in the example of Devorah, the merit was endowed on herself.

As we light our own candles during the holiday we place them by the window so that others can be reminded of the miracles of Chanuka and of Hashem's providence. As such, Chanuka provides an opportunity for us to use light in similar ways to Devorah and Aviel, providing light for others that inspires them to grow in their Judaism, and in turn, benefits us spiritually as well. As seen above, no act is too small.

Advertising the Miracle

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General advertising principles state that any message will have more impact if it has greater reach and frequency. Meaning, if you want your campaign to be successful, you need to get your message to as many people as possible as many times as possible. That being said, as we are charged with the obligation of *pirsumei nisa*, advertising the Chanukah miracle, one might think that the menorah should be lit anywhere and at any time to get the message out. Large Chanukah parties at schools and shuls would seem the perfect setting. What about a large simcha, like a wedding or bar mitzvah party? In the following paragraphs, we will explore the halachot regarding public menorah lightings.

The Shulchan Aruch (OC 671:7) states that there is an obligation to light a menorah in shul because of *pirsumei nisa*. The Mishna Berurah (671:44) states that even though lighting in shul is a minhag, you still make a bracha. The Ram" a writes that one can not fulfill the obligation of Chanuka lighting with the lighting in shul, and would need to light at home. In shul, the lighting is done in between mincha and maariv, even though many hold that at home the minhag is to light after tzais haKochavim. The Mishna Berurah (671:46) writes that this is because it is a time when everyone is gathered together, and since everyone has to go home and light their own menorah, a shul can not have the entire tzibur wait there until the shul menorah is lit.

There is a dispute as to whether the menorah can be lit in shul before mincha on Friday if there

is no minyan.⁵² Some opinions allow lighting if it is very likely that a minyan will be there shortly. The Rav Poalim states that in this case you do not need a minyan, but merely ten people. So if women and children who have reached the age of chinuch are present for a total of ten people, the menorah may be lit with a bracha.

If there is a large gathering in the shul late at night, such as a meeting of the membership or for a shiur, under certain circumstances the menorah should be lit with a bracha even if everyone present has already lit in their homes. This would only be done if the menorah was not lit on that same night in this shul with a bracha already, and if at least ten people present did not see the lighting of a menorah in another shul.

What about outside of a shul? The Shulchan Aruch mentions the obligation of *pirsumei nisa* in a shul specifically, so if you have a large gathering of people in the street or in a community center, you would not be obligated to light the menorah, and if you did, you would not make a bracha. The Piskei Teshuvos explains that the obligation to light in a shul is to act as a remembrance for the Bais HaMikdash and any gathering outside of a shul is not in that same category. He does add, though, that in cases where there would be a great deal of *pirsumei nisa* and if there would definitely be some people present that had not lit their own menorah, that you could light the menorah and say a bracha.

Rav Soloveitchik zt”l held that you can not light candles at a gathering, such as of a men’s club, at a chagiga or at a wedding⁵³. He based this on the opinion of his father, Rav Moshe Soleveitchik zt”l, regarding the halacha in the Shulchan Aruch of lighting on motzei Shabbos. While at home, most follow the opinion of the Taz to make havdalah first and then light the menorah, in shul most people light the menorah first and then make havdalah. (Rav Chaim Soleveitchik z”l was of the opinion that the menorah should be lit before, “Vayihi Noam”.) Rav Moshe Soloveitchik z”l explained that the difference is because the obligation of *pirsumei nisa* is on a “tzibur shel tefillah” specifically. Once maariv and havdalah have been completed, the people gathered there no longer have the status of a tzibur.⁵⁴ They are just a gathering of people at the same place at the same time. Only when there is still some form of liturgy that needs to be said does that group have the status of a tzibur, which would allow for lighting the menorah with a bracha.

So if you are planning a big party for Chanukah, fry up as many latkes and donuts as you can, but make sure to consider carefully if it is appropriate to light a menorah at your gathering.

The Truth of the Hero

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“In the time of the Second Temple, when the Greeks ruled over Judea, they made laws for the Jews, nullifying religious life, not allowing them to learn Torah and keep mitzvos. The Greeks stole the Jews’ money and violated their daughters. They entered the Temple, made breaches in

⁵² Piskei Teshuvos page 472.

⁵³ Nefesh HaRav, page 223, Harirei Kedem, page 285.

⁵⁴ Nefesh HaRav page 222.

its walls, and unpurified that which was pure. The Jews were distressed and embarrassed by the Greeks until the G-d of our fathers had mercy on them and saved them from the Greeks. The Hasmonean high priests were strengthened; they killed the Greeks and saved the Jews from their hands. They then appointed a king from the priests which returned sovereignty to Israel for more than 200 years until the destruction of the Second Temple.” (Rambam, Hilchos Chanukah 3:1) Indeed, “so great were the Hasmoneans that had it not been for them, Torah and mitzvos would have been forgotten from the Jewish people entirely.” (Ramban, Genesis 49:10)

It is very peculiar then that the Talmud teaches that the entire Hasmonean dynasty was killed out, so that if someone were to proclaim genealogy from the Hasmoneans you should assume they are actually a descendant of slaves. (Bava Basra 3b) How is it possible that a dynasty that is credited with saving the Torah, and in turn the Jewish nation, was completely wiped out?

Ramban suggests that despite their greatness, the Hasmoneans violated the Torah by assuming the monarchy. The blessing that Jacob bestows upon Judah (Genesis 49:10) is that once the monarchy transfers to Judah’s descendants it will not be given to anyone else. Ramban believes that any kings appointed not of Davidic descent, violating Jacob’s decree, are therefore susceptible to great punishment. Even with their great intentions and accomplishments of saving the Jewish nation from destruction and religious extinction, the Hasmoneans did not know their boundaries and took their power too far.

We should not be surprised that our greatest heroes, celebrated in every Jewish home, had flaws of character as well. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch teaches (Genesis 12:10-13) “The Torah never hides us from the faults, errors and weaknesses of our great men. Just by that it gives the stamp of veracity to what it relates. But in truth, by the knowledge which is given to us of their faults and weaknesses, our great men are in no ways made lesser but actually greater and more instructive. If they stood before us as the purest models of perfection we should attribute them as having a different nature, which has been denied to us. Were they without passion, without internal struggles, their virtues would seem to us the outcome of some higher nature, hardly a merit and certainly no model that we can hope to emulate ... From our great teachers of the Torah, and truly Ramban can be reckoned amongst the very greatest, we would accordingly learn that it may never be our task to whitewash the spiritual and moral heroes of our past, to appear as apologists for them. They do not require our apologies nor do such attempts become them. Truth is the seal of our Torah, and truthfulness is the principle of all its true and great commentators and teachers.”

Though the Hasmoneans made a great error in taking the monarchy, we should not think less of them. On the contrary, their sacrifice and dedication to Judaism is all the more instructive. They were people with emotions and flaws. They were leaders with everyday struggles and feelings. This is precisely what makes their lives and their work so great an example as we continue every year to celebrate their victories and triumphs.

The Weak in the Hands of the Strong

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Rav Yechezkel Sarna, the famed Rosh Yeshiva of the Chevron Yeshiva, used to ask schoolchildren whether the Macabees were strong or weak. The children always responded to the sage that the sons of Matisyahu were strong. Rav Sarna would challenge the children that in the 'al hanisim' prayer for our miraculous salvation on Chanukah, we thank God that he delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, meaning the Macabees. Rav Sarna explained that the Greeks were stronger in their military might, but no army can battle against the Almighty.

In Parshas Miketz, which generally falls out during Chanukah, Pharaoh was bothered by the faulty logic of his dreams (the weak consuming the strong) and their recurrence. When Pharaoh dreamt his first dream, the Torah writes "vayikatz" (*Bereshis* 41:4). Rav Hirsch explains that the Hebrew term *vayikatz* (he awoke) implies that he arose in shock. What was the shock? It was the illogic of his vision. It was the weak cows consuming the strong ones. This perversion of the laws of nature shocked Pharaoh from his slumber. The meek vanquishing the resilient is nothing short of a supernatural act of God. Pharaoh knew that this was not an anomaly when the dream repeated itself. He was bothered by the altering of the holy laws of nature.

Many have connected this parsha with the festival of lights. The beginning of the parsha which describes Pharaoh's dreams, Yosef's interpretation and action, and Pharaoh's response to Yosef's interpretation epitomizes Chanukah. We experience the anomaly (albeit in dream form) of the suspension of 'nature;' we find the recognition of Hashem and praising of Hashem (by both Yosef and Pharaoh); finally, of course, we are inspired by the salvation that took place as a result. Is this not the story, the moral and the celebration of Chanukah?

Rav Nebenzahl cites the famous question of Rav Yosef Karo (*Beis Yoseph* on *Tur Orach Chaim* 670): if there was sufficient oil to burn for one day and it burned for eight, then the miracle was in fact for seven days. Why then did Chazal institute Chanukah as an eight day festival? Despite many answers to this question, Rav Nebenzahl chooses the answer attributed to R'Simcha Zisel Ziv zt"l the *Alter of Kelm*. The *Alter* taught that "had Chanukah been established as a seven day festival, the impression would have been given that there is a distinction between "miracle oil" and "natural oil" - "miracle oil" was lit by Hashem, and "natural oil" can kindle with no need for Divine intervention. In order to dispel this notion, Chazal established an eight day festival highlighting the fact that there is no difference between "natural oil" and "miracle oil". Just as "miracle oil" is not bound by any laws of physics, but it burns because the King of kings commanded it to, so too "natural oil" does not burn as a result of laws of physics. In other words: the One Who declared that oil burn for eight days, is the One Who declares that oil burn for the 'usual' amount of time (see *Chochma uMussar* volume II, article 61)."

In our very busy lives, may we never be too busy nor too big to recognize the truth of the natural order, the truth of God's intervention. May we always remember that despite being a great Jewish hero, Yehudah haMakabbi represented the weaker side, not the stronger side. May we never take advantage of that 'order' and may we properly 'thank and praise' Hashem for his love, providence and compassion. After all, Pharaoh was not too big to do so.

The Obligation of Women to Light Chanuka Candles

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Since I was a young girl, I have been inspired by the words of our Sages about great women throughout the generations. I enjoyed the beautiful explanations of the *bracha* of *She'asani kirtzono*, "that God made me in His will," and the principle of *af hein hayu b'oso hanies*, "That since women were involved in the miracle, they are obligated to commemorate it." *Af hein* obligates women of all generations in *mitzvos* and teaches their powerful role in the essence of the commands. The principle of *af hein* gave me a particular connection to the applicable *mitzvos*.

In this article I'd like to explore the principle of *af hein hayu b'oso hanies*, "That since women were involved in the miracle, they are obligated to commemorate it." How does this principle relate to the *mitzvah* of lighting Chanukah candles and to the principle that women are exempt from *mitzvas aseh shehazman grama*, time generated *mitzvos*? Did our Sages intend for women to be obligated in the *mitzvah* of lighting Chanukah candles or is there a *mitzvah* for men to light candles and because women were involved in the miracle, they have a different obligation to light candles?

The *mitzvah* of *hadlakas neiros*, lighting candles, and its history, is explained beautifully by the Rambam in his *Hilchos Chanukah*. During the time of the second *Beis Hamikdash*, the Greeks decreed oppressive laws against the Jews and offensive acts in the *Beis Hamikdash*, until God had mercy on *Bnei Yisrael* and saved them. After the *Chashmonaim* defeated the Greek army, there was only one day's worth of oil to light the *menorah*. Miraculously, that small pitcher of oil lasted for eight days. Our Sages instituted the *mitzvah* of *hadlakas neiros* - to light candles for eight days to publicize the miracle that occurred.

The *mitzvah* of *hadlakas neiros* is a time-generated *mitzvah* – the *chanukiya* must be lit during the days of Chanukah. An overriding principle that applies to *mitzvos* is that women are exempt from time-generated *mitzvos*. This principle states that any time there is a *mitzvah* that is generated by time; women are not obligated to fulfill that *mitzvah*.

Although generated by time, there are certain *mitzvos* that other overreaching principles obligate women to perform. The laws of *Shabbos* are generated by time, but women are obligated in all of the laws of *Shabbos* because of the principle that since women are obligated in some of the *mitzvos* of *Shabbos*, they are obligated to fulfill all of the *Shabbos* laws. Chanukah is another example of where another overriding principle obligates women to fulfill a command where they otherwise would be exempt due to the *mitzvah* being time generated. The *mitzvah* of lighting Chanukah candles is generated by time, but we learn that women are obligated to light candles due to the principle of *af hein hayu b'oso hanies*, "That since women were involved in the miracle, they are obligated to commemorate it."

Originally, when our Sages instituted the *mitzvah* of lighting Chanukah candles, women were obligated to publicize the miracle just as men were. It is only because lighting Chanukah candles is a time-bound *mitzvah* that women were exempted. To "re-obligate" women in lighting

candles, our Sages stated since they benefited from the miracle, women are obligated to light candles as well.

Today, women have a double obligation to publicize the *Chanukah* miracle. Whenever God relates to *Bnei Yisrael* through *hashgacha pratis*, specific Divine providence, we must recognize the miracle in a public fashion by publicizing it. There is a second obligation unique to women which stems from the principle of *af hein*, to publicize the personal miracle that they were involved in.

Lighting candles in order to reflect the personal benefit the woman gained from the *Chanukah* miracle gives a special rush of personal redemption that connects women to the *mitzvah* of lighting *Chanukah* candles.