



The Uniqueness of the Chanuka Thanksgiving

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rebbetzin Leah Kohn

On *Yom Tov*, we recite *Hallel* to commemorate miracles, but Chanukah introduces a unique element: "*l'hodot u'lehallel*" (to thank and praise). This distinction is emphasized in the *Al Hanissim* prayer and when lighting the Chanukah candles. Chanukah is fundamentally about giving thanks to Hashem. The *Al Hanissim* prayer recounts the miraculous victory over the Greeks, where the few triumphed over the many, and the pure over the impure. The miracle of the oil, which burned for eight days despite there being no halachic requirement for pure oil, symbolizes this victory. The Greeks, who valued human intellect and denied anything beyond it, could not accept miracles or the concept of creation *ex nihilo* (*yesh me'ayin*).

Rav Moshe Shapira explains that Greek philosophy was rooted in rejecting anything beyond what the mind could comprehend. This led to their denial of miracles and the possibility of transcending the laws of nature. The Rambam discusses how nature's laws at creation differ from those we observe now, emphasizing that Hashem's hidden presence can still be discovered by those who seek Him.

The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot illustrates this with Hillel's observation of a floating head. The Maharal explains that the head symbolizes intellect going with the flow, accepting superficial natural reality. Greek philosophy which focused solely on cause and effect, left no room for thanksgiving, as they did not recognize a higher power.

The Gemara recounts how Alexander the Great reached the gates of Gan Eden, where he was denied entry for his inability to recognize Hashem and give thanks. Thanksgiving or *hodaah*, is recognizing and appreciating what we receive from Hashem, beyond what we could ever provide for ourselves. This is the essence of Gan Eden, where the

joy of gratitude prevails.

The miracle of the oil on Chanukah represents this deeper understanding. A child might see a candle's flame as permanent, but in reality it's slowly being consumed. The Midrash says that Avraham Avinu saw a "city on fire." And he said, "Is it possible that this city has no leader?" The city symbolizes the world at large. Avraham couldn't believe it had created itself. A fire can be destructive or it can be a source of energy and light. Many people live their lives refusing to believe it will ever end. "*Hashamayim shamayim la'Hashem, ve'ha-aretz natan livnei adam* – The heavens is to Hashem and earth he gave to human beings. The Kotzker asks, why did he give earth to human beings? And he answers to turn it into shamayim. We have the ability to take physicality and create light and closeness to Hashem.

When Yaakov Avinu ran away from Esav, he stopped off to sleep at Har Hamoriah. There the stones merged into one stone and he built an altar and poured oil on it which later became the *shemen hamishcha*-the oil that was used to sanctify the kohanim and the vessels of the *beit hamidkash* and the oil through which the Chanuka miracle happened. Yaakov Avinu lived a life personifying the will of Hashem. He didn't view creation as myriad beings affected by cause and effect but as one entity with the purpose to create a connection with Hashem, to take the finite and elevate it to infinity. A Jew's power is to take physical reality and create spiritual light, closeness to Hashem. and if you connect to Hashem in this way, you can transcend nature, there are no physical limitations.

The *Beit HaMikdash*, where heaven and earth met, was a place of miracles, defying natural laws. Similarly, the Chanukah oil's eight-day burning and the Maccabees' victory over the Greeks were miraculous. The Greeks' defeat

was not just military but ideological, shattering their belief system and the *Al Hanissim* prayer emphasizes that Hashem delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the impure into the hands of the pure, highlighting the spiritual nature of the victory.

The Chashmonim's faith and humility, trusting in Hashem despite overwhelming odds, exemplify the essence of Chanukah. This humility and recognition of Hashem's greatness leads to true thanksgiving. We are called Yehudim, derived from Yehuda, meaning to give thanks, reflecting our mission to express gratitude to Hashem in all aspects of life. If we would only think- Hashem chose me, a finite person, to have a relationship with Him, what a privilege, our immediate reaction would be thanksgiving. Thank you Hashem for entrusting me with all this potential, for making me a partner with You. The Chashmonim went into battle with *mesirus nefesh*, with full faith that Hashem would help them and He did. Similarly, when the *meraglim* came back describing the land and the 31 mighty kings Hashem said not to be afraid. For if you are with me, what does it matter- a bee and an elephant are one and the same. What does it mean Hashem is one? That there is nothing beside Him and all of physical reality exists only through His will. It's like one force with different physical expressions. When we understand our physical world in this way, the consequence is *lehodot*.

How did Rav Yechzkel Abramski survive the labor camps in Siberia? He got up one morning and started to say *Modeh Ani* and then he stopped and thought-Why am I saying *Modeh Ani*? What am I thankful for? And then he thought- If I was able to get up in the morning on a day like this and say *Modeh Ani*, how could I not be thankful. Chanukah teaches us that the greatest thanksgiving is the ability to give thanks itself.

The History of Chanukah

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller-Gottlieb

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When we picture Chanukah, we envision a time of light. To understand this more profoundly we need to step back in time to understand the nature of darkness. In Bereishis it depicts the world's beginning,

"V'haaretz hayta tohu v'vahu v'choshech al-pnei tahom-The world was vast, formless, chaotic, with darkness on the face of the depths." Hashem created the world for us to bring light to dark places, to reveal who we

could be so that we become like Him through the power of free will. Galut (exile) has the same letters as *l'higlat* (to reveal). The concealment of exile has the power to reveal human potential if we choose correctly.

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The four words used to describe the world's beginning parallel the four major exiles. The first is the Babylonian exile, a world power that seemed to be unstoppable, vast and unknowable. It touched the part of us that's afraid of force. Still many Jews withstood the test, notably Daniel, Chanania, Mishael and Azariah, who illuminated the Babylonian exile. The Babylonians were conquered by the Persians whose exile is described as v'vohu-chaotic. They were materialist and aesthetic and although beauty is spiritual, submitting it to materialism is galut. It was a test that was alluring, yet many Jews said no. Think about Esther in the palace where she could have said, "Well, thank God I'll be rescued." But that's not what she did. Instead, she had Mordechai gather the people to pray. Everything they were doing said there's something more. The Persians brought about the second redemption when Esther's son Daryavesh allowed the Jews to return to Israel. However, the people living there, responded to the return with great anger and slandered the Jews to the Persian authorities forcing them to wait 18 years until they were finally allowed to continue building the bet hamikdash.

Exactly 70 years after the exile, Alexander the Great vanquished the entire known world including Persia. Then things changed. His kingdom was divided into four segments and Israel ended up under Seleucid rule. The kings were all called Talmi and the beginnings of our inner destruction, of Galut Yavan, corresponding to choshech-darkness began. Talmi gathered 72 scholars to translate the Torah into Greek and this was called the Septuagint. His purpose was to reduce the Torah to another body of Grecian knowledge. He wanted to take the spirituality out of Torah while retaining its intellectual credibility and it worked. The seed was sown and the Jews were drawn to the allure of Grecian intellectualism which gave them a false sense of purpose and the illusion of living in a human-centered world. The Seleucids lost the battle to the Greek northern kingdom who conquered Israel. Greece was far less tolerant, more aggressive, and bent on assimilating the Jews and this is where the Chanukah story begins. Although the symbol of Greece is the Olympic torch, our symbol of them is darkness. Their light signifies intellectuality and the human-centered world. In fact, the numerical value of Yavan is 66 while the word Hechal (sanctuary) is only 65.

Finding the part of you that wants sanctity is harder than finding the part of you that responds to Greek reality. The Jews became more and more influenced by the Greeks.

If you look at our times, this is what you see. We're living in the Maccabean era. We have our assimilation rate and they had their Hellenistic reality. The Maccabean wars began when the Greeks forbade specific mitzvot which all had one thing in common- bringing Hashem into a world which the Greeks thought was their world. Not that long ago, before Oct. 7, there were people who were dedicated to that ideal. There was great anger. How could you put a mechitza into a shul in the center of Tel Aviv? How could you bring Hashem's world into the world we own? The medium through which it changed then and now is Hashem's intervention. The Greeks forbade Shabbat which is the foundation of emunah. Emunah means seeing Hashem as a Creator, as someone who is involved, and seeing the Torah as prophetic. Shabbat testifies to all this and that's why it's threatening. If everything is about the human-centered world, then the body is perfect as is and Brit Milah is offensive as it implies that the body's value has to do with its dedication to its spiritual goals.

You could look at Rosh Chodesh and wonder, why should anybody be offended by it? This is actually the deepest of the three as it defines time in terms of Hashem's will. Greek think describes time as Aristotle did-something that always was, doesn't have to be for anything and is what you make of it. When Hashem created time, He established revolutions and rotations, the sun, the moon and stars which are meant to be otot and mo'adim, signs of Hashem's involvement. There has to be a beginning and times of meeting. All of the holidays, which follow the order of Rosh Chodesh, are times in which we can meet Hashem on His terms, celebrating His interventions. Nothing could be more anti-Greek than that.

The Chashmonaim didn't think that they were going to take on the Greek Empire and win militarily. They went in with mesirut nefesh. I'm in the world for a reason, to do Hashem's will. Their battle cry-"Mi LaHashem Elai," is the light of Chanukah. Our yearning for purpose and connection is a soul desire. The Navi laments the 70 years of exile and how damaging it was; how Ezra and the Anshei Knesset Hagedolah had to do so much rectification. We've been in

exile almost 2,000 years. What does Hashem expect of us? He expects that when the button is pressed, that we rediscover the pure neshamah within us That's what happened on Chanukah. The war, which initially was a civil war between the Jews, not just against the Greeks, led to restoration, Mamlechet Kohanim, to what Rambam calls the return of Malchut Yisrael, which has to do with saying yes on Hashem's terms, not Grecian terms. The light only came because of the darkness. When you look at the nes itself, the menorah was defiled, there were idols in the Beit Hamikdash and they could have said, "It's going to take a while till we get everything back to what it was." But they didn't. They acted b'zrizut (with alacrity). They knew this is what they had fought for. They sent people to the north to bring olive oil, but in the meantime, they looked for a pure vial of oil and they found one. Although, the vial didn't have to have the seal of the Kohen Gadol according to halacha, they wanted purity.

After the Oslo Accords, when there was a war going on in the South of Israel, my husband's very Hasidic son and some friends wanted to do something for the soldiers. They filled a car up with food and tzizit, thinking the religious soldiers might need the tzizit. Everybody wanted them. Fast forward to the 10/7 War. How many Tzizit were given out so far? 50,000. And these aren't just for the Yeshiva boys in the army I heard a totally secular guy without a kippah, saying- "This is my badge of belonging."

This is the light of Chanukah and it has to do with our being able to look at people who aren't as observant as we are and doing whatever can be there for them. The war is from Hashem. He created the darkness at the beginning in order to give us the ability to find light. It's up to us to do this.

There's a disagreement between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, about how to light the menorah. We follow Beit Hillel and begin with one candle while Beit Shammai held to start with eight. When Mashiach comes, we're going to do it according to Beit Shammai. Why? Because the miracle was there all along. We just had to find it. It's all part of a plan and every day we're getting closer to the fulfillment of that plan. The darkness that we are living in is in fact part of the coming light, may it be revealed soon with the coming of Mashiach.