

BS"D

*THE LESSON OF CHANUKAH*

Shira Smiles Shiur – December 2, 2009/Kislev 15, 5770

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Chanukah, the Festival of Lights, holds special hidden meaning for all who look deeply into its lights. The mitzvot of this holiday are totally spiritual. For example, there is no commandment to have a *seudah*, a festive meal, on Chanukah as there is for Shabbat and other Yomim Tovim and, although we eat fried foods and latkes on Chanukah, these are customs that are an enhancement and a celebration of our understanding of the great miracle of the oil on Chanukah, rather than mitzvot in their own right. Most importantly, about the light of Chanukah itself, we are enjoined from using the Chanukah candles for any practical purpose. We are merely to see them and contemplate their light.

While the miracle of the small cruse of oil lasting eight days was truly great, there is yet another awe inspiring miracle associated with Chanukah, the miracle of the defeat of the great Greek army by a band of just thirteen Chashmoneans. We glorify this miracle in the *Al Hanissim* prayer which we add to our *Amidah* prayers and to the Grace after meals. So the question the *Gemarah* raises is very relevant; which miracle lies at the heart of our Chanukah observance? As it appears to be a commemoration of the Miracle of the oil, why is this miracle more central to our Judaism than the miracle of the battle that ensured our freedom of religion?

The answer may very well lie in human nature itself. Great war victories are often attributed to the strategies of genius generals, or perhaps to fortuitous weather conditions, or other such causes. As miraculous as victory seems to be, God is very likely left out of the picture. On the other hand, when something happens that can in no way be attributed to human causes or natural law, there is no way to explain it other than by giving God His due and praising Him for it. That is why the miracle of the oil is at the core of the Chanukah holiday. Once we understand Hashem's guidance in the affairs of the natural world, we are ready to attribute to Him the military victory as well. It is through the prism of the glasses holding the olive oil and the flame that we learn how to view the world in general.

Actually, it is this perspective that must suffuse our vision of the entire world and of nature itself. Who taught "nature" to let a seed rot in the ground in order to be resurrected as a new plant? Who measured how much oil is to be consumed by a given flame? Indeed, Who commanded that oil burn and not vinegar? As we observe the flames in our menorahs, these are the questions we must contemplate. These are the ideas that will bring us closer to Hakodosh Boruch Hu. This is the purpose of Chanukah, of all our mitzvot, and of our entire lives. We will learn to thank and to praise God not only for the open, revealed miracles, but also for the hidden miracles of our day to day existence, for each miraculous breath He lovingly bestows upon us.

Nevertheless, we are still left with some questions. Let us start with the sanctity of these candles. Isn't it strange that Shabbat candles are meant to be used to illuminate a room or the page of the book, while the light of the Chanukah candles may not be used at all? If we explore the hidden concepts behind these lights, we will appreciate what the Chanukah lights represent and why they are so sacred.

When Hashem created the world, He created light first. This primal light suffused the entire world. But Hashem understood that this light would be too pure and too strong to allow human beings to survive. Better their frailties survive “the light of day” than perish in this primal light. So, after thirty six hours, Hashem took this pure light and hid it, leaving only a small fraction to illuminate the earth, diffused through layers of spiritual atmosphere.

But this light would not be lost forever. It would be brought back when Aharon lit the original menorah. That light shone from the Tabernacle in the desert and from the Temple in Jerusalem. And when the Temple was destroyed, Hashem gave us a way to access this pure light again. Through our lighting the menorah on Chanukah, symbolic of the Temple menorah that burned for eight days, we have the opportunity to bring that light back to earth. Over the eight days, we light thirty six candles (excluding the shammos), reminiscent of the thirty six hours of that original light on earth, alluded to in the name of the month *Kislev*, *kis lev*, “the hidden thirty six”. This is why we may not profane the sanctity of these lights by using them for mundane matters. We must cherish this gift of holiness Hashem has given us and use it only to raise our own spiritual consciousness, to explore our inner light, our very soul, and its connection to our Maker.

The nature of our relationship to this light lies at the debate between *Beis Hillel* and *Beis Shammai* as to the proper sequence for lighting the candles through the eight days of Chanukah. *Beis Shammai* believes that we begin by lighting all eight candles on the first day of Chanukah, and each day we are to subtract one candle. He believes that on the first day we are overawed by the light and the spirituality. However, given human nature, he believes that as each day passes, that awe diminishes, and so we reflect this diminution by lessening the number of candles we light on each subsequent night. *Beis Hillel*, while well aware of human nature, believes optimistically that as we contemplate the candles each night, our appreciation of the miracle of Chanukah and the continuing miracles of our existence will grow, and so he believes we start with one candle on the first night of Chanukah and add an additional candle until we reach the full eight candles and a state of complete awe of the Creator. We follow the ruling of *Beis Hillel*, with the menorah being completely aglow on the last night of Chanukah.

What is interesting is that although Chanukah is historically the last holiday commemorating miracles, the Gemarrah stipulates that the era of Queen Esther signifies the end of the age of miracles and the end of recorded miracles in Tanach. Esther, in composing the Psalm (22) to the “morning star” alludes to this reality, and our sages proclaim that Esther herself is the morning star, the harbinger of the day to come. Certainly the Tanaim knew our history. They could not have erred so egregiously to forget that Purim of the Persian Empire and our subsequent return to our homeland and rebuilding of the Temple under Ezra and Nehemiah preceded Chanukah under the Greek Empire, which occurred during the Second Temple period.

Why this contradiction? Our Sages had tremendous insight. They understood that once an event is recorded, it is over. In this respect, Purim and the miracle associated with it is over. But the miracle of Chanukah is ongoing. It foretells the constant light of Hashem’s Providence throughout the long exile of which Chanukah was just a taste. We survived the Greek Empire, we survived the Roman Empire, and we continue to survive today. That flame which the Chashmoneans ignited continues to burn and will not be extinguished. That flame, that “pintele yid” within each of us can grow into a raging fire.

As we contemplate the flames of the menorah, we must direct that inner flame to feel the awe His Presence generates, to recognize the loving kindness with which He treats us each moment of our lives, and to give thanks and sing praises to His Holy Name. As we become more and more aware of the loving kindness within the natural laws He promulgated, within the oil that burned and was not consumed, within our nation that was persecuted but never destroyed, the flame grows larger, and the gratitude and praise of His great Holy Name grow louder.