

Chanukah: Getting Out of the Mud

The following is based on the Rebbe's personal writings from 1937. The header implies that part of what was recorded in the journal entry was given as a speech in a Paris Synagogue¹. The Rebbe explains a deeper understanding of the story of Chanukah and its relevance to our lives.

The Talmud² describes the holiday of Chanukah in the following manner:

What is Chanukah? Our Rabbis taught, "On the twenty-fifth of Kislev begin the days of Chanukah, which are eight [days] on which lamentation for the dead and fasting are forbidden. For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils therein, and when the Hasmonean dynasty prevailed and defeated them, they searched and found just one cruse of oil which had the seal of the High Priest, but only contained enough [fuel] for one day's lighting. However a miracle occurred, and they lit [the lamp] with it for eight days. The following year these [days] were established as a festival with [the recital of] Hallel and Thanksgiving.

From a surface reading of the Talmud, it would seem that they were not aware of the miracle of Chanukah and therefore asked about the significance of the holiday.

However, their question cannot be understood superficially, since the story of Chanukah occurred in the beginning of the Mishnaic period and they surely must have known its historical significance.

Concerning the period of the Hasmoneans, the Talmud³ states:

During the time of the Temple, the reign of the Hasmoneans lasted one hundred and three years and the reign of the House of Herod lasted one hundred and three years. From then on, one should count the years from the destruction of the Temple. We therefore see that this was [a period of] two hundred and six years.

Thus historically, the events of Chanukah occurred relatively close⁴ to the time of this Talmudic dialogue—surely they were aware of the war between the Greeks and Israel.

Therefore, since they were aware of the history of Chanukah, there must be a different significance in the Talmud's question "What is Chanukah?"

It is for this reason that in explaining the words "what is Chanukah?" Rashi explains that the Talmud's question is: "In regard to what miracle did they establish it?"

¹ Reshimos, #125. Adapted and reworked into English by Rabbi Dovid Markel.

² Shabbos, 21b

³ Avoda Zara, 9a

⁴ See Talmud, Shabbos, 15a that Hillel lived 100 years prior to the destruction of the Temple. In Seder HaDoros it states that the story of Chanukah occurred in 3621 which was the beginning of the Tannaic period.

Rashi explains that though they knew the story of Chanukah, the Talmud was concerned about what primary miracle caused them to establish the holiday, as this seems ambiguous.

If the holiday was established because of the miracle of the oil, the holiday should have been named “The Holiday of Candles”, just as the “Holiday of Sukkos (booths)” is thus called as explained in the verse,⁵ “So that your [coming] generations will know that I had the children of Israel live in booths when I took them out of the land of Egypt.”

However, if the holiday was established to commemorate the victory of the Jews over the Greeks, the Holiday should have been established a way that is similar to how Purim is commemorated, through feasting and rejoicing.

Because of this the Talmud asks, what was the reason that the holiday of Chanukah was established?

The Greeks

To answer this question, the Talmud states:

When the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils therein, and when the Hasmonean dynasty prevailed against and defeated them, they searched and found just one cruse of oil which had the seal of the High Priest, but only contained enough [fuel] for one day's lighting. However, a miracle occurred, and they lit [the lamp] with it for eight days.

To appreciate this answer on a spiritual level, an explanation of the meaning of the word *Yavan* (Greece) is necessary.

The literal meaning of the word *Yavan* (יָוָן) is “mud”; something created by a mixture of water and dirt. This is clear from the verse⁶ “And He drew me up out of the roaring pit, from the thick mire (*tit ha'yavan*), and He set my feet upon a rock, He established my steps.”

Being that in Hebrew, the root of the word *Yavan* (Greece) is the same as the word for mud, it is understood that the *kelipah* (negativity) of *Yavan*, is similar to that of mud.

G-d created a balanced world, in that negativity opposes holiness, as King Solomon stated in Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) “G-d has made one thing opposite the other.” *Kelipah* is the negative “mirror image” of *kedushah* and therefore, to a certain degree it mimics it.

The Talmud⁷ states that “water signifies Torah.” The opposite of the “water” [of Torah], is intellect [as it exists] separate from Torah. Greek culture was steeped in the intellectual pursuits of philosophy and other wisdoms.

When the water of intellect becomes mixed with dirt, the result is a muddy quagmire. This represents an intellectualism in which the individual is not separate from the dirt, which signifies corporeality.

⁵ Vayikra, 23:43

⁶ Tehillim, 40:3

⁷ Bava Kama, 17a

When a person is immersed in mud—whether it is physical or spiritual mud—it is not possible for him to extricate himself from it through natural means. This is expressed in the account in Torah, of the miracle that occurred for the honor of our father Avraham, in which the king of Sodom was saved from the quagmire.

The verse states⁸:

Now the valley of Siddim was [composed of] many clay pits, and the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled and they fell there, and the survivors fled to the mountain.

Ramban explains this cryptic verse as follows:

There is no doubt that the meaning of “clay pits” is pits of mud and mortar, as in the verse,⁹ “And in the pit there was no water but mud, and Yirmiyahu sank into the mud” as well as the verse,¹⁰ “And He drew me up out of the roaring pit, from the thick quagmire.”... This is the meaning of the verse¹¹ “And the king of Sodom came out toward him,” – that is, the king of Sodom “*came out*” of the pit when Avraham passed by, because the miracle occurred in Avraham’s honor. Thus, in his honor, he came out to greet him. It could be that Avraham peered into the pit... and the miracle was done through him.

Just as the King of Sodom could not escape the quagmire he was in, so is it regarding a person stuck in a condition of *Yavan*.

When the mind of a person is sunken into physicality, there can be no natural expectation that he will change his ways. On the contrary, he steadily sinks lower and lower, just as in quicksand one sinks steadily lower.

The reason this is so, is that since his intellect also pursues corporeality, there is nothing to cause him to alter his ways, as his mind agrees to his course in life.

The mud of *Yavan* is not only created through external wisdom, separate from Torah, but even the wisdom of Torah can create this mud.

The Talmud¹² states about Torah study that, “If he is *zachai* (meritorious), it becomes an elixir of life for, if he is not *zachai* (meritorious), it becomes a deadly poison for him.” While usually *zachai* is translated as “meritorious” it also means “refinement”.

Therefore, the meaning of this dictum is that, “If a person refines his physicality, the Torah acts as medicine, if not, it acts as poison.” If a person is not refined then the “water” of Torah becomes mixed with the dirt of his physicality and creates “mud.” Instead of Torah study affecting him in a positive manner it turns into poison and mud.

⁸ Bereishis, 14:10

⁹ Yirmiyahu, 36:6

¹⁰ Tehillim, 40:3

¹¹ Bereishis, 14:17

¹² Yuma, 72b

The more a person who has not refined himself learns, the more his ego grows. Moreover, he excuses whatever of his actions that are not exactly in accord with Torah, thus corrupting true Torah law.

In order for a person to make a correct *Halachik* ruling it must be as the Talmud¹³ explains on the verse¹⁴ “And HaShem is with him”, that “everywhere the *Halachah* is determined in accordance with his views.”

Only when a person is humble and refines himself can “HaShem be with him” to correctly adjudicate the Halacha. If he is unrefined and arrogant he will inevitably corrupt the Halacha. The Torah that he learns will create a quagmire that he slowly sinks into.

Although it is true that as the Talmud¹⁵ states, “The words of Torah are not susceptible to impurity” and therefore Torah itself is unaffected by a person’s actions, nevertheless, Torah can affect the **person** negatively, as the Talmud¹⁶ states, “It becomes a deadly poison **for him**”

This concept; that *Yavan* is like a quagmire that one slowly sinks into, is alluded to in the letters of the word *Yavan* itself:

The word *Yavan* is made up of the letters (י) *Yud*, (ו) *Vav*, and (נ) *Nun*. These letters are essentially the same, except that each one becomes steadily lower than the other. The word starts as a (י), then a (ו) and finally a (נ).

The letter (י) *Yud* signifies the faculty of Chochmah (Insight), as elaborated in Tanya¹⁷:

HaShem’s four letter name is composed of four letters: *Yud*, *Hai*, *Vav*, and *Hai*. The *Yud*, which is a simple point, symbolizes His Wisdom (Insight), which is in a state of concealment and obscurity, before it develops into a state of expansion and revelation within the comprehension and understanding (of Binah).

The analogous opposite to the *Yud* is the secular wisdom of philosophy, which was popular in Greek culture¹⁸.

Just as the (י) *Yud* transforms into a (ו) *Vav* and then into a (נ) *Nun*, the way that secular ideas affect a person is slow and works by degrees.

At first these corrupted concepts only affects his mind, but not his speech or actions. However, the (י) *Yud* of *Yavan* is followed by the (ו) *Vav*, which signifies the emotions¹⁹. When a person’s thought process becomes affected, it will eventually affect his emotions as well, and it will ultimately draw him into the greatest depths, as signified by the letter (נ) *Nun*, which is the lowest of these letters.

¹³ Sanhedrin, 93b

¹⁴ I Shmuel, 16:18

¹⁵ Brachos, 22a

¹⁶ Yuma, *ibid*

¹⁷ Igeres HaTeshuvah, Ch. 4

¹⁸ See Torah Ohr, Miketz, 41a

¹⁹ Tanya, *ibid*

This is how one's evil inclination (Yetzer HaRa) leads him into sin. It does not begin fully at the outset, but as the Talmud states,²⁰ "Such are the wiles of the Tempter. Today he says to him, 'Do this', tomorrow he tells him, 'Do that'. Ultimately he bids him to, 'Go and serve idols,' and he and serves [them]."

The Talmud²¹ explains this as well, on the verse,²² "Woe to those who draw iniquity upon themselves with cords of vanity, and sin like the ropes of a wagon"

R. Assi stated, "At first the Evil Inclination is at like the thread of a spider, but ultimately it becomes like the ropes of a wagon, as it is said, 'Woe to those who draw iniquity upon themselves with cords of vanity and sin like the ropes of a wagon.'"

So too, *Yavan* begins by affecting a person's mind and only later matriculates into affecting his actions.

Entering the Temple

The Talmudic statement, "When the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils therein" may be understood accordingly:

The Greek's began their destruction from the core. They did not destroy the Temple. They merely defiled it. This matter is expressed in the *Al Hanisim* prayer, in that all that was necessary was to "cleanse the Temple" from the effect of the Greeks having entered it.

"When the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils therein." Every Jew is considered to be a Temple, as in the verse,²³ "They are the Temple of HaShem." The objective of the Greeks was to defile the mind of the Jewish people, which is compared to oil, with the impure wisdom of Greek philosophy and the dirt of physicality.

The reason that they specifically chose to defile the oil, was because the concept of "impurity" is not rational, since the oil undergoes no physical change at all by merely being touched. They therefore specifically attacked those items that cannot be rationally understood.

The Rambam (Maimonides) expresses it thus,²⁴

It is clear and apparent that the concepts of purity and impurity are Scriptural decrees. They are not matters determined by one's understanding and are included in the category of *Chukim* (Mitzvot that are super-rational). Similarly, immersion in a *mikvah* to ascend from impurity is included in the category of *Chukim*, because impurity is not a matter of mud or filth that can be washed away with water. Instead, the immersion is a scriptural decree and requires the focus and intent in the heart.

²⁰ Talmud, Shabbos, 105b

²¹ Suka, 52a

²² Yeshaya, 5:18

²³ Yirmiyahu, 7:4. See Torah Ohr, Vayeshev.

²⁴ Mikvaot, 11:12

The Greeks sought to defile the intellect of holiness through philosophy. They therefore specifically defiled the oil in the Temple, which signifies the holy wisdom of the Jewish people.

In accord with this, the Midrash²⁵ records arguments between the philosophers of Athens and other Greek philosophers, with the Jewish sages—they sought to defile the wisdom of Torah though the impure wisdom of philosophy.

A spiritual battle

In order to combat the intellectual battle of the Greeks, the Hasmoneans fought back with the trait of self-sacrifice.

To combat Greek rationalism it was necessary to fight back with super-rationalism. Therefore although they were weak and few, they fought an army greater than them both in number and strength.

This approach was so successful that not only were they victorious in the intellectual war against Greek Hellenism, but more so, they illuminated the entire individual, and indeed, the external world as well, with the G-dly energy of self-sacrifice.

It is for this reason that the mitzvah of lighting the menorah must be done in a manner that it illuminates the outside, as Talmud states,²⁶ “Our Rabbis taught, ‘It is incumbent to place the Chanukah menorah by the door of one's house, on the outside.’”

Tanya²⁷ expresses this concept as well - that when the essence of the soul is revealed, it affects the entire person:

The force of the Divine light of the blessed *Ein Sof* that is encloded in the *Chochmah* of the soul, is sufficiently great and powerful to banish and repel the *Sitra Achera* and the *Kelipot* so that they cannot even touch its garments, namely, the thought, speech and action of faith in the One G-d.

The only way to truly defeat Greek culture is through the light of self-sacrifice.

In the days of Matisyahu

The *Al HaNissim* prayer begins with the word, “In the days of Matisyahu, son of Yochanan the High Priest, the Hasmonean²⁸.”

The spiritual concept of Matisyahu is *Matnas HaShem*, which mean “A gift of G-d”. In order to conquer the Greeks they needed Heavenly assistance. In order to vanquish one's greatest obstacles a person must reveal the G-dly spark within himself, as explained in Tanya:²⁹

²⁵ Breishis Rabba, 11:5-6, Talmud, Bechoros, 8b, Eicha Rabba, 1:4

²⁶ Shabbos, 21b

²⁷ Ch. 19

²⁸ See Avudraham, Seder Chanukah that Yochanan was referred to as Chashmonai. See as well Bes Yosef, Orach Chaim, 682 and Josephus.

²⁹ Ch. 19

When he faces a test challenging his faith in the One G-d, [a faith] which has its roots in the uppermost heights of holiness, namely, the faculty of *Chochmah* of the Divine soul, in which the light of the blessed *Ein Sof* is en clothed, then all the *Kelipot* become null and void and vanish as if they never were, in the presence of HaShem. So it is written, "All the nations are as nothing before Him etc." and "For lo, Your enemies HaShem, for lo, Your enemies shall perish and the workers of iniquity shall be scattered," and again, "As wax melts before fire, so shall the wicked perish," and "The hills melted like wax."

The son of Yochanan

The *Al HaNisim* continues by saying that Matisyahu is *Ben Yochanan* - the son of Yochanan. The spiritual significance of the "son of Yochanan" is similar to the expression "*Ben Chorin*" or "*Ben Olam Haba*," which means a "free man" or "a person who merits the world to come".

The same can be said of the expression "*ben Yochanan*" - that the person has reached the level of "Yochanan".

The Talmud³⁰ explains the significance of seeing Yochanan in a dream as follows:

If one sees the name Huna in a dream, a miracle will be wrought for him. If one sees the name Chanina, Chananiah or Yochanan, miraculous miracles will be wrought for him.

The difference between seeing Huna in a dream and the other sages mentioned, is that the name Huna contains a single *nun* of the word *nes*, which means miracle, whereas the name Yochanan contains two *nuns*. Therefore when one sees Huna they can expect one miracle, however if he sees Yochanan, he can expect abundant miracles.

By saying in the *Al HaNissim* prayer that the miracle of Chanukah occurred when there was a *ben Yochanan*, it essentially means that during Chanukah there was a double level of miracles, as expressed by the two *nuns*.

As opposed to the story of Purim, to vanquish Greek Hellenism, the Jewish people needed a double miracle.

In the story of Purim, the Jewish people did not need a level of double miracles for two reasons:

The story of Purim occurred soon after the exile of the first Temple³¹, in which the Jewish people were on a greater spiritual level, as evidenced by the fact that there still were prophets in Israel, as the Talmud states:³²

Come and hear: When the first Temple was destroyed — Cities with pasture land were abolished, the Urim and Thumim ceased and there was no longer a king from the House of David. Who are the former prophets? [The term 'former'] excludes Haggai, Zechariah,

³⁰ Berachos, 57a

³¹ See Seder HaDoros, that the Purim story occurred in the years 3404-3405

³² Talmud, Sota, 48b

and Malachi who are the latter [prophets]. For our Rabbis have taught: When Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi died³³, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel.

In addition to the fact that the Jewish people were generally on a higher level, the sin of the time of Purim was not as severe, as Talmud explains³⁴ that they only pretended to commit the sin:

R. Shimon ben Yochai was asked by his disciples, “Why were the enemies of Israel (a euphemism for the Jewish people themselves) of that generation deserving of extermination?” ... He answered them, “It was because they bowed down to the image...They only pretended to worship, and also He (HaShem) only pretended to exterminate them.

Being that their sin was not as severe, they did not need a tremendous miracle to save them. However, in the time of Chanukah, in which they both were on a lower spiritual level, in addition to their intellect already being defiled by Greek ideas, the miracle had to come from a higher level—*Miraculous Miracle* -, the level of *ben Yochanan*³⁵.

What is Chanukah?

This explains why the holiday of Chanukah is referred to as Chanukah instead of “The holiday of candles”, or the like.

The Talmud states that, “On the twenty-fifth of Kislev the days of Chanukah [begin].” The Ran explains this Talmudic statement thus: The word Chanukah is a composite of the words חנו and כס, which means, “They rested on the twenty-fifth”, of the month of *Kislev*.

The word כח - *Koh*, also means “Thus” in Hebrew, and is symbolic of the spiritual level of *Malchus* (Kingship), and it does not represent direct G-dly revelation as does the word הו, which means “This”. *Koh* is rather like a mirror, which only reflects G-dliness.

The spiritual significance of *Chanu Koh*, is that the G-dliness of “Self-Sacrifice” should permeate even the most external levels of *Malchus*.

The Talmud continues that, “Lamenting the dead and fasting are forbidden” on Chanukah. One should not lament about how spiritually impure he still is and about how he could ever possibly illuminate himself.

A person could think that only through becoming embittered and lamenting his sorry spiritual state, could he ever be able to affect change in himself. Moreover, he could think that he must fast and break his body. About this Talmud states, “Lamenting the dead and fasting are forbidden.”

The way to affect oneself positively on Chanukah is not through bitterness and breaking one’s body, but through drawing out and revealing the inner depth of his soul.

³³ See Seder HaDoros that they died either in the year 3442 or 3448.

³⁴ Megilah, 12a

³⁵ This is as well the concept that the miracle was done via the high priest who would enter the Holy of Holies which signifies the very depth of the Jewish heart.

The Talmud continues and states, “A miracle occurred and they lit [the lamp] for eight days.” This signifies that not only must a person illuminate one “day” of himself, but that all his attributes should be illuminated with G-dliness.

The way this is to be done is as the Talmud concludes, “The following year these [days] were established as a festival with [the recital of] Hallel and Thanksgiving.” A person should begin with gratitude (Thanksgiving), a basic recognition of G-d, which grows into the revealed light of Hallel.

The lesson

There are three dimensions to every Jew: The external, the inner and the inner of the inner.

In his external dimension he serves HaShem by bringing G-dliness into all his peripheral affairs. This idea is expressed in the verse,³⁶ “Know Him in all your ways” and is the type of service demanded of us during the week - “Six days shall you work and perform all your labor³⁷.”

However, in this regard a person should only work with his external attributes. The verse states,³⁸ “If you eat the labor of your hands [you are praiseworthy].” However, his mind should always be connected to HaShem. This is compared to the day of Shabbos, as verse states, “but the seventh day is a Shabbos for HaShem, your G-d.” In his mind he should be completely immersed in G-dliness.

However, the true inner depth of a Jew is his Self-Sacrifice. This is expressed by the number eight, which even transcends the seventh day of Shabbos. This is similar to the connection [to G-dliness] through the mitzvah of Bris Milah (circumcision), which is specifically performed on the eighth day [after birth].

When a Jew reveals the spiritual level of “eight”, as was revealed on Chanukah, he acquires the ability not only to illuminate himself, but to transform the darkness of his “animal soul” and the world around him.

³⁶ Mishlei, 3:6

³⁷ Shemos, 20:9

³⁸ Tehillim, 128:2