



Cause for CELEBRATION



Why wasn't the victory over the Greeks enough reason to give thanks? | BY ROBERT SUSSMAN

IT'S OBVIOUS WHY WE CELEBRATE CHANUKAH, right? If we look closely, we'll see there's more to the well-known story than meets the eye. The gemara (Shabbos 21b) asks: What is Chanukah? And Rashi explains that what the gemara wants to know is: with regard to which miracle in particular did our Sages establish the celebration of Chanukah? And the gemara answers:

Our Rabbis taught that on the 25th of Kislev, days of Chanukah are celebrated... because the Greeks entered into the Temple and defiled all of the oil that was there and when the Chashmonaim overpowered them

and triumphed, they searched and only found one jar of oil that was set aside and sealed by the Kohen Gadol, but there was

only within that jar enough oil to light for one day. A miracle occurred and they lit from it for eight days and, the next year, they established days of celebration with Hallel (praises) and thanksgiving.

And we all know this, the famous miracle of Chanukah. But, something strange happens when we look a bit more closely at things. After we light each night of Chanukah, our Sages established that we say the paragraph *HaNeiros Halalu*:

These candles we light on the miracles, on the wonders, on the salvations, and on the battles which You did for our forefathers in those days at this time, through Your holy Kohanim. And all eight days of Chanukah, these candles are holy. We are not permitted to make use of them [this is why we have a shamash, an extra candle – not to light the other candles from it, but so that we don't accidentally make use of the light of the actual Chanukah candles], only to gaze upon them in order to give thanks and praise to Your great name for Your miracles and for Your wonders and for Your salvations.

Notice anything missing? How about something so important that, just a second ago, we said that it was the miracle for which our Sages established the entire celebration of Chanukah. What happened to mentioning the miracle that occurred with the jar of oil? And notice also that, all of a

“THE GEMARA GIVES A PRECISE ANSWER FOR WHY WE CELEBRATE CHANUKAH, AND YET EVERYTHING THAT WE'RE ACTUALLY MEANT TO SAY ON THE DAYS OF CHANUKAH TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE CELEBRATION MAKES ABSOLUTELY NO MENTION OF THIS LITTLE DETAIL.”

sudden, our Sages aren't talking about a single miracle anymore, but now they're saying 'miracles' in the plural. If the sole reason for Chanukah was the miracle of the jar of oil as the gemara suggests, then it should have said: '...on the miracle, on the wonder...' in the singular.

And that's not the end of it. If we look at the paragraph called *Al HaNissim* that our Sages decreed we add to our davening and bentching during the eight days of Chanukah, we find the exact same omission:

[We thank you] for the miracles, the redemption, the mighty deeds, the salvations, and the wars that you performed for our forefathers in those days at this time. In the days of Matisyahu the son of Yochanon, the Kohen Gadol, the Chashmonaim, and his sons, when the wicked Greek kingdom rose up against Your nation Israel, to make them forget Your Torah, and to cause them to stray from the statutes of Your will. And You, in Your great mercy, stood up for them in their time of suffering, You defended their cause, You judged their claim, (and) You avenged them. You

“IT SEEMS FAR MORE FITTING FOR THE MANY MIRACLES CONNECTED WITH THE MILITARY VICTORIES TO HAVE BEEN NOTED AS THE REASON FOR WHICH OUR SAGES CHOSE TO ESTABLISH THE CELEBRATION OF CHANUKAH, RATHER THAN THE ONE MIRACLE ASSOCIATED WITH FINDING THE JAR OF OIL.”

transmitted 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 righteous, and the evil-doers into the hands of those who were involved with the study of Your Torah. And for Yourself, You made a great and holy name in Your world, and for Your nation Israel, You made a great salvation and redemption unto this very day. And afterwards, Your children came to the Holy of Holies of Your house, and cleaned Your Heichel, and purified Your Tem-

ple, and lit candles in the courtyards of Your sanctuary, and they established these eight days of Chanukah for thanksgiving and for praises to Your great name.

Once again, not a word about the jar of oil! What's going on here? The gemara gives a precise answer for why we celebrate Chanukah and, yet, everything that we're actually meant to say on the days of Chanukah to acknowledge the celebration makes absolutely no mention of this little detail. And, from these two paragraphs, *HaNeiros Halalu*

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“ONLY WHEN HASHEM PERFORMS FOR US A MIRACLE THAT IS OPEN AND OUTRIGHT IMPOSSIBLE, CLEARLY BREAKING THE VERY LAWS OF NATURE – SUCH AS A MINUTE AMOUNT OF OIL SUFFICIENT FOR A SINGLE DAY, BURNING FOR EIGHT DAYS – REVEALING BEYOND A SHADOW OF A DOUBT THAT THE HAND OF HASHEM DID THIS THING, ARE OUR SAGES ABLE TO ESTABLISH ‘DAYS OF PRAISE AND THANKSGIVING.’”

and *Al HaNissim*, it's clear that our Sages wanted to stress for us that Chanukah is very much about the many miracles associated with the military victories that Hashem made for us over the mighty Greek army. So why doesn't the gemara make any explicit mention of these miracles that transpired during the military campaign as the reason for celebrating Chanukah?

And we can make the question even stronger if we consider that the miracle surrounding the jar of oil burning for seven extra days was seen and witnessed only by those few Kohanim who happened to be present and serving in the Temple at that time, as the menorah was lit in a section of the Temple where only Kohanim could enter, and they took turns serving in

the Temple. On the other hand, the many miracles of the multi-year war with the Greeks were publicised and revealed before the eyes of the entire Jewish people, as well as the entire world! So, it seems far more fitting for the many miracles connected with the military victories to have been noted as the reason for which our Sages chose to establish the celebration of Chanukah, rather than the one miracle associated with finding the jar of oil.

HIDDEN MIRACLES AND OPEN MIRACLES

The Maharal explains the primary reason for establishing the celebration of Chanukah was indeed because of the victory over the Greeks. The only problem was that it wasn't sufficiently clear that the military victories of the Chashmonaim came about miraculously, rather than through their own strength and skill. The difficulty with hidden miracles, such as the ones that took place during the military campaign, is that they don't deviate overtly from the natural order of things, and because of this, people can conceivably err and claim that such things happened by chance or from ordinary causes and circumstances. Only when Hashem performs for us a miracle that is open and outright impossible, clearly breaking the very laws of nature – such as a minute amount of oil sufficient for a single day, burning for eight days – revealing beyond a shadow of a doubt that the hand of Hashem did this thing, are our Sages able to establish “days of praise and thanksgiving” – ie, *yomim tovim*. So, Hashem made the miracle of the oil in order to make it known that all of these events – the military victories,

which had until then been seen as merely *hashgacha pratis* (Divine providence), and the oil – were entirely miraculous.

We can now understand what Rashi was trying to get at with his explanation of the gemara's question of what is Chanukah: which miracle – which open miracle – served as a strong enough basis for the designation of these days of celebration? The miracle of the oil served to reveal that Hashem's transmitting the many into the hands of the few was also a miracle and a wonder, but, more than that, it was because of the many wondrous occurrences that took place throughout the military campaign that Hashem needed to perform the miracle with the oil in the first place, so that the eyes of the Chashmonaim would be opened and their hearts awakened to the fact that all of their military victories were entirely miraculous. Therefore, the gemara answers that the reason the celebration of Chanukah was established was because of the open miracle of the oil, mentioning nothing about the military victories, because those weren't miracles that were suitable for creating such a celebration, and, were it not for the open miracle of the oil, our Sages couldn't have instituted a Chanukah celebration at all!

Throughout the days of Chanukah, we're meant to make the mental leap from reflecting on the miracle of the oil, which our *chanukiyot* easily bring to mind, to recognising that Hashem brought about the defeat of the Greeks in just as wondrous a way – that He rules over the entire world and continually renews the laws of nature according to His will. And so the texts that we say after we light the candles and during our *davening* and *bentching* focus on our salvation from the mighty Greek Empire – on the many everyday seemingly ordinary miracles that could easily be overlooked and even denied because they didn't clearly violate the laws of nature. In these dark times, as we gaze on the holy light emanating from our *chanukiyot*, may we be reminded of, and give thanks for, the many miracles – both open and hidden – that Hashem has done for us in the past and that He continues to do for us every day. **IL**

Based on sichos from the Sifsei Chaim, Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, z"l

