

The Menorah: Vanquishing Darkness through the Power of the Spirit

We all know the basic rabbinic retelling of Chanukah. In 165 BCE, the Macabees against all odds conquered the Temple from the Syrian-Greeks. When they entered the Temple, the altar was defiled with impure sacrifices and idols were placed within the sanctuary. The Macabees purified the Temple, destroyed the idols, and rededicated the Temple. When they came to light the menorah, the elaborate seven-branched candelabra, there was only one pure jar of oil, only enough to last one day. Miraculously, the candles burned for eight days, until they could find more oil.

Each holiday on the Jewish calendar celebrates various miracles. On Passover we celebrate the Exodus and the splitting of the red sea. On Sukkot we remember the clouds of glory and pillars of fire that led the Children of Israel through the desert. On Shavuot we remember the Revelation at Mount Sinai. On the scale of miracles to be commemorated, this miracle seems minor indeed. In fact, the miracles happened in the Temple, a place few could even enter! Clearly, for the rabbis, the reason for commemorating the miracle was not the event itself, but rather the significance of the event. Encoded in the lighting of the menorah was a message we are to carry for every generation.

When Moses was called by God the first time to redeem the Jews, God appeared as a flame embedded within a bush. Moses realized the fire was burning, and yet the bush was not consumed. Now it is a fundamental fact that in order for fire to exist there needs to be some sort of fuel- something needs to burn. This is the first of many times that God's presence is described as a self-perpetuating flame. What was the meaning of the symbol? *God appeared as pure light!* It is this God that will come to the aid of the Jewish people in the darkness of slavery and liberate their bodies and souls.

It is also interesting that God reveals himself in the form of a tree. Trees in ancient thought were associated with eternal life. For this reason, our Torah is called a 'tree of life for those who hold fast to it' (Proverbs 3:18) Thus the eternal God, who came to announce the redemption of Israel, appears as a living tree.

Moses returns to this same place years later, when he goes up to receive the Torah. In fact, the Hebrew word for bush, *sneh*, is clearly an allusion to *Sinai*. Like the episode of the burning bush, God 'descends' from heaven in the form of fire, and the entire mountain is aflame, but not consumed. Again we have the same image, albeit on a much larger scale.

On Mount Sinai, Moses is commanded to fashion a menorah. The Torah tells us that the menorah is to be fashioned of pure gold, a clear allusion to fire. In fact, the Talmud tells us that when Moses went up to Mount Sinai, he had difficulty imagining what the menorah was to look like. God gave him a vision of the golden menorah in flames. (Shabbat 22b) Just like the fire of the bush, the menorah itself represents pure flame. This flame can never be extinguished, and its source is not from below, but from above. However, the analogy goes further than this, for the menorah itself is fashioned after the floral images

of a tree! The menorah is to have three cups made like almond blossoms, calyxes and flowers. *In reality, the menorah is a stylized tree of pure fire, and is a constant reminder of the revelation of God to Moses and Israel at Sinai. Therefore, the menorah, and by extension the Temple, represented God's presence in the community of Israel.*

With this information, we can now understand the true message of the miracle of Chanukah. *The miracle was in the nature of the flame itself. The light was a self-perpetuating flame; it was pure, unadulterated light.* 1[1] Just as the spirit of God had appeared to Moses thousands of years earlier, God's spirit had now appeared to the Macabbees. It confirmed that indeed God dwelled with the Jewish people again. Thus this tree of life and light inspires hope and optimism about the future.

One might think that in fact, the victory of Chanukah was purely a human victory. God did not split a Red Sea or lead them with clouds of glory and pillars of fire. In fact, many fighters were killed and martyred. The miracle of the lights assured them- and us- that in fact the victory of Chanukah was a victory of the Divine spirit. *It was a sign of hope, that human action can bring great spiritual salvation to the world.* In 1948, there was another great salvation against all odds. Is it any coincidence that the menorah was chosen to be the coat of arms for the State of Israel?

When we light the menorah, we are instructed ideally to place the menorah outside by the door where all can see. In fact, there is an opinion in the Talmud that tells us the rabbinic commandment is not to *light* the candles, but to *place* the candles so that all can see. The reason given by the Talmud is *pirsumei nisa*; we are commanded to publicize the miracle long ago. Just like the miracle of the candles inspired hope that inspired human action can have redemptive power, we need to remind ourselves in the darkest of times this same lesson. We are partners with God and through Torah and *mitzvot* can bring hope to those most in need. Just like the Macabbees we have our own wars to wage, and in lighting the candles we express the faith that God will respond to our efforts.

We live in dark times indeed. World conflicts, physical and emotional suffering, and economic uncertainty can create a feeling that this world is devoid of light, and that human action is futile. For this reason we need to light the menorah- to remind others and ourselves. Just like the Temple, each of our houses can be places where the Divine presence resides.

Through our individual and collective actions, may we bring the light of the Divine into the world, and 'may the one who made miracles possible for our ancestors in those days' bring us miracles 'at this same season'

May you all be blessed with a *Chag Urim Sameach*, a happy Chanukah.

1[1] This is the message of Zachariah ch. 4, which the miracle is modeled after.