



בס"ד

Partners In Torah

San Diego

Study Guide &

Take home Dvar Torah

חנוכה תשע"ח

Chanukah Edition

Thank you to Rabbi Avi Cohen, whose article inspired this booklet.

December 12, 2017

© 2017

Partners In Torah San Diego
Mission Statement:

Partners In Torah San Diego is a community-wide, independent and inclusive adult education program focusing on understanding Jewish relevancy to our lives by studying text most interesting to each participant. Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour each week, friendships are forged between mentors and mentees, thinking is shared, and hearts are inspired.

Partners in Torah San Diego has proven to be effective at reclaiming the rich legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for many who have, until now, lacked access.

Welcome. Thank you for coming. Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we can grow together as a community.

Chanukah: What you see, what you don't see ...

When the holy temples stood in Jerusalem, as part of the daily service the Menorah was lit every evening by a Kohen. It was lit at sundown and the flames burned throughout the night until the next morning. Only the very first drop of oil from the olive was used, and it was produced under the holy supervision of Kohanim. Each flask was sealed; if the seal was broken it was unfit for use in the Menorah. During the Second Temple era, approximately 200 years after it was built, the Greeks invaded the temple and deliberately contaminated each flask of olive oil. (140 BCE) When the Maccabees retook the holy temple after defeating Greek armies in battle, they purified the Temple and wanted to restore the service of lighting the Menorah once again. They could find no untouched oil to light, and it would take a full 8 days to produce new kosher oil for the Menorah. Miraculously, they found a single flask that was not defiled, containing enough oil for one night. They filled the cups of the Menorah with the oil, put in the wicks and lit the Menorah. Instead of going out the next morning, the flames continued to burn for the full 8 days needed to produce new kosher oil.

The Sages found this miracle so important, that one year after the miracle, they established the Chanukah holiday to commemorate it. For 8 consecutive nights, beginning on the 25th day of the month Kislev, it is a mitzvah to light a

Chanukah lamp (8 branches plus Shamash) to commemorate the eight days the menorah miraculously stayed lit.

Shouldn't a Jewish holiday reflect something of national importance, something that impacts the continuing survival and identity of the nation? Might it have been wiser to have commemorated the miraculous victories of the Maccabees over the Greek armies, which enabled the rededication of the Temple to take place?

In the על הנסים (Al hanissim) prayer that is added during Chanukah to the Silent devotion and to the Birkat Hamazon, we say:

עַל הַנְּסִיּוֹת וְעַל הַפְּרָקוֹן וְעַל הַגְּבוּרוֹת וְעַל הַתְּשׁוּעוֹת וְעַל הַמְּלַחְמוֹת שֶׁעָשִׂיתָ
לְאֲבוֹתֵינוּ בְּיָמֵינוּ הַיּוֹם בְּזֵמַן הַזֶּה:

*For the miracles and the salvations and the mighty deeds and the victories and the battles that you have done for our forefathers, **in those days and in these times.***

From the words “in these times” it is clear that the miracle of the menorah burning 8 days does have a relevance to these times. What is the relevance?

Let's first consider a 'discovery' from the field of behavioral economics: **Confirmation Bias**

Confirmation bias occurs when people seek out information or evaluate a situation in a way that fits within their existing thinking and preconceptions. For example, a consumer who likes a particular brand and researches a new purchase may

be motivated to seek out customer reviews on the internet that favor that brand. (Nickerson, A. Confirmation Bias, 1998)

Within the field of Economics this concept has changed government policies and important theories. How does it operate within our own daily lives, *in these times?*

It impacts you and me by how we notice things around us that are confirming (the person we don't like looks like a slob today); also when I am feeling particularly self-absorbed, I will *not notice* the needs of others, or ignore what people close to me are telling me. To the extent that this is true about us, our lives proceed without stimulus for personal growth or change. We remain who we are, and our daily experiences and interactions are forcefully fit into our existing ways of thinking. We are very busy confirming to ourselves what we already think or believe. What does it take for a person to grow beyond, to assume unsought responsibilities, or even to leave the comfort zone we inhabit in order to respond to the needs of another?

Let's consider how the Torah teaches us to expand beyond, to grow and become more than we already are.

(Acknowledgement: the next portion is based on the thinking of Rabbi David Fohrman and can be found on his website Alephbeta.org – Why Do We Celebrate)

Let's look at Moshe encountering the Burning Bush (Ex. 3: 1 – 12). This encounter propelled a very reluctant, humble leader into a role he did not seek:

‘an angel appeared as a blaze of fire from amid the bush.... Behold the bush was burning by not consumed Moshe thought: I will turn aside and look at this great sight – why will the bush not be burned? G-d saw that he turned to see, and called out to him: Moshe, Moshe.... ‘

Moshe took note of a phenomenon which was non-conforming to his understanding of the world. And for that matter – it was fire burning but not consuming! (as in oil burning in the Menorah but not being consumed, at least for the 8 days.)

Let's consider also the picture of Mt. Sinai at the moment of Revelation, with Moshe standing upon the mountain:

All of Mount Sinai was smoking because Hashem had descended upon it in fire; its smoke ascended like the smoke of the furnace... (Ex. 19:18)

Here the Torah pushes us toward a specific conclusion: the presence of G-d evokes fire, but it is fire which does not consume. *It is not fueled by the object it inhabits.*

So now, on the simplest level, should we perhaps chase after every fire truck, hoping to catch a glimpse of G-d's presence? I do not recall inspired Jews doing this. Perhaps instead we

should be open to seeing within the natural world around us phenomenon which can evoke Divine inspiration, and develop within us the capacity to look into the world around us to take note of its possible meaning, noticing connecting points which transcend simple physical explanation; perhaps some inspiration and even transcendence will be found within. A magnificent sunset might be a good starting point to consider, or a quiet walk along the beach focused on the magnitude of the ocean, hearing how it speaks to us.

Let's consider the stated goal for the holiday of Chanukah. We conclude the Al Hanissim prayer as follows:

וְקַבְּעוּ שְׂמוֹנֵת יָמֵי חֲנֻכָּה אֵלֵינוּ, לְהוֹדוֹת וּלְהַלֵּל לְשִׁמְךָ הַגָּדוֹל.

These 8 days of Chanukah were established in order to express **thanks** and praise to Your great Name.

In Hebrew the work 'Modeh' – thanks is the same word as 'to admit,' as in to admit that I owe gratitude for something I received. Not to thank is deemed as a denial of dependence and refusal to admit that the 'giver' provided for me. It is to overlook what has taken place. Someone too focused on themselves, who clings to seeing the world around as 'my world' - there to provide my needs, cannot sincerely be thankful. To 'thank' means to acknowledge that I received help from another, and that I owe a debt of gratitude to another. Certainly such 'debts' require 'repayment' – at least on the level of the receiver feeling humbled before the giver. That is why to express true thanks to our Creator is to

acknowledge a debt of gratitude, and a responsibility towards another. Overlooking (not noticing the giver) leaves the recipient more 'free' – less responsible. This is why being an appreciative person is an essential character trait within the Jewish system of values. In fact, it is the fundamental character trait in connecting with the Divine.

Now let's consider the competing miracles of Chanukah – the oil burning for 8 nights and the miraculous military triumph over the superior Greek forces.

If you were given the opportunity to feel great thanks and appreciation to G-d for winning a war against overwhelming odds, recognizing the Divine Hand which enabled your victory, you would face a tremendous moral challenge. Within a short time, recounting the battles themselves, you quickly see yourself as ever more heroic. Given a little more time, and your entire outcome becomes based on your bravery and daring – suddenly the Divine Hand disappears from the picture. Understanding this, and recognizing that the most important lesson of Chanukah would be to maintain the eternal greatness of Israel as *the People who perceive the Divine*, the Sages only wrote about the oil burning for 8 days. The few Kohanim involved could not possibly rewrite the story to make themselves out to be the heroes.

And is this capacity to perceive the Divine connected in any way with our conflict with the Greeks? Well, I am glad you asked.

ךושח - and darkness (Gen. 1:2 'and **darkness** hovered upon the surface of the deep') – this refers to the Greeks who darkened the eyes of the Jewish people with their decrees. During the Chanukah persecutions, four mitzvot were voided: brit milah (circumcision); declaring the New Moon; Shabbat; and the study of Torah.

Nachmonides (Moses ben Nahman, d. 1270 Israel) writes:

“For I needed to oppose those who know much about nature and follow the path of Aristotle, who denied the existence of anything he could not sense; he was so haughty as to think, he and his evil students (Greek culture) that anything he could not comprehend with his mind, was not true.” What you see is what you get; nothing more can be made of our existence.

Famously, Aristotle taught within his concept of form defining function that this was true of human beings as well – that the human form (worshipped for its beauty and prowess) defined that the only purpose in living was to live a rational life, based on understanding the world around us within its physical parameters. This approach eliminates the Divine from consideration, and is supported by Aristotle's view that the universe always existed, and therefore it has no creator.

How would Aristotle have responded to a burning bush? What would he have heard at Sinai if he was present – the voice of G-d, or simply a sound and light show in need of scientific exploration?

This became the conflict between the Greeks and the Jews throughout Greek ruler over the Land of Israel. This is the thinking behind the Greeks occupying the Temple and defiling the oil. Oil is oil. There is no room to differentiate between pure and impure oil. There is no scientific difference.

In rededicating the Temple, the Jewish people understood that only with pure oil, its flask bearing the seal of the Kohen Gadol / High Priest, could the Menorah be lit. Only then would the light it produced belong within the confines of G-d's Temple, illuminating the entirety of the physical world with a light that inspires transcendence, and evokes seeing the Divine Hand as active and present.

One flask was found, and the Menorah was lit. The victorious Maccabees had much to celebrate. But then, as the Menorah burned on for 8 nights, a clarity of seeing was rekindled among the Jewish people – seeing what is there, and also seeing purpose, meaning, and inspiration beyond what is there. The Jewish people were now ready to continue their mission as the People who perceive the Divine.

And for the Chanukahs that have intervened, the 2,181 we have celebrated year after year, the Jewish people maintain this clarity of vision, seeing not only that which is there, but also seeing the opportunity for transcendence and inspiration that are within.

Happy Chanukah.