



Partners In Torah
San Diego-Los Angeles
Study Guide

Take home Dvar Torah

Chanukah

תשפ"ד

December 12, 2023

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Our learning tonight will be dedicated to our brothers and sisters in Israel

Hello, Welcome!

Partners In Torah 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.

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

Thank you for joining us!

Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we may grow together as a community.

Before coming to Partners this evening, we lit the sixth Chanukah candle, celebrating the miracle of the one flask of oil, which should have fueled the candles for only one day and miraculously lasted for a full eight. Jews the world over lit their menorahs to celebrate the sixth consecutive day that the oil burned. We start with a single candle on the first night, adding another candle every night for eight days to focus our attention on how, with every passing day, the miracle increased in its wonder.

The Talmud asks, “מאי חנוכה?” *What is Chanukah?* Rashi explains the question: על איזה נס קבעוה? *For which miracle did (the Sages) establish it as a holiday for generations?*

The Chanukah story comprises two independent miracles: The miracle of the military victory of the few *Chashmonaim* over the massive Greek army, and the miracle of the oil that burned for eight consecutive days when it naturally should have burned for only one. So, for which miracle was it principally established?

Here is the quote from the Talmud (Sabbath 21b).

מאי חנוכה? דתנו רבנן : בכ"ה בכסליו יומי דחנוכה תמניא אינון דלא למספד בהון ודלא להתענות בהון שכשנכנסו יוונים להיכל טמאו כל השמנים שבהיכל וכשגברה מלכות בית חשמונאי ונצחום בדקו ולא מצאו אלא פך אחד של שמן שהיה מונח בחותמו של כהן גדול ולא היה בו אלא להדליק יום אחד נעשה בו נס והדליקו ממנו שמונה ימים לשנה אחרת קבעום ועשאום ימים טובים בהלל והודאה.

The Sages taught, the 25th day of Kislev begins the eight days of Chanukah during which one is not allowed to eulogize or fast. For when the Greeks entered the Temple sanctuary, they deliberately defiled all the pure oil there. When the Chashmonai kingdom overcame them and were victorious, they searched and found but one flask of pure oil still sealed with the seal of the high priest, but there was only enough in it to light the menorah for one day. A miracle happened, and the candles remained lit from it for eight days (the time needed to produce new pure oil).

The next year, they established those days as a holiday with praise and thanksgiving [to Hashem].

The Talmud teaches us that the Sages established the Chanukah holiday to praise and thank Hashem for the miraculous eight days that the candles of the menorah in the Holy Temple stayed lit. This is why our menorahs have eight arms when the Temple's menorah had only seven. Our menorah does not symbolize the Temple's seven-arm menorah; it rather is to remind us of the eight-day miracle of the oil.

The Sages identified the miracle of the oil to be the more important; hence, they established the Chanukah holiday as days of praise and thanksgiving. For eight consecutive days beginning on the 25th day of the month Kislev, we have a mitzvah to light a eight candles to commemorate the eight days that the menorah in the Holy Temple miraculously remained lit.

We also fulfill the mitzvah of praise and thanksgiving to Hashem by reciting the complete Hallel (unlike on Rosh Chodesh when we recite only a partial Hallel) in the morning prayers. In reciting the Hallel, our hearts should be filled with praise and thanksgiving to Hashem for the Chanukah miracle.

Although it's an impressive miracle, what about it should evoke deep feelings of praise and gratitude to Hashem? When lighting the menorah, for what should our feelings of gratitude be? That the menorah stayed lit for so many days? What in that should evoke feelings of gratitude in me?

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

עַל הַנְּסִים וְעַל הַפְּרָקוֹן וְעַל הַגְּבוּרוֹת וְעַל הַתְּשׁוּעוֹת וְעַל הַמְּלַחְמוֹת שְׁעָשִׂיתָ לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ
בְּיָמֵם הָהֵם בְּזְמַן 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 at this time.***

The words “at this time” demonstrates that the miracle of the menorah lights does indeed have a relevance to us, even today. Indeed, the message of the miracle of the menorah is as relevant today as it was when it first happened.

Rabbi Yosef Caro (1488-1575) poses a very famous question about Channukah in his commentary *Beit Yosef* (Orach Chaim 670:1) on the *Tur*.

He asks, “Because the one undefiled bottle of oil had enough to burn for one night, its burning the first night was not a miracle. The miracle only started on the *second* night and continued for the next seven nights. So why is Channukah celebrated for eight days when the miracle was really for only seven?”

A book titled נר למאה - *Ner leMeah* contains 100 (!) answers to this one question. I would like, however, to focus on the following answer.

The first day of the holiday is to commemorate the miracle of oil burning. The remaining seven days commemorate the oil’s miraculous burning for the extra seven days.

Yes, that’s right. The first day was not a miracle at all; the oil *should* have burned for that day! But the Sages want us to understand and appreciate something extraordinary-- that even when oil burns *it’s a miracle!* But what miracle is there when oil burns? ***The miracle of nature itself!***

Every time you put a wick in oil and ignite it, the oil will burn. This is a fact of nature. But the question is, why is that? Why is it that oil burns and vinegar, for example, does not? “I don’t know!” you will answer, “That’s just the way it is! Try lighting vinegar and see what happens!”

The correct answer to the question is that this is how Hashem made the world. He gave oil its properties which allow it to burn, and he gave vinegar its properties, and, the ability to burn is not one of them.

This idea is brought out clearly in the following true story about the holy Sage Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa. The Talmud reports (Taanit 25a):

חד בי שמשי חזייה לברתיה דהוות עציבא אמר לה בתי למאי עציבת אמרה ליה כלי של חומץ נתחלף לי בכלי של שמן והדלקתי ממנו אור לשבת אמר לה בתי מאי איכפת לך מי שאמר לשמן וידלוק הוא יאמר לחומץ וידלוק תנא היה דולק והולך כל היום כולו עד שהביאו ממנו אור להבדלה

One Friday evening Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa saw that his daughter was upset. He said to her, "My daughter, why are you upset?" She answered, "I mixed up the bottle of oil with the bottle of vinegar, and, by mistake, I filled the cups for the Shabbat candles with vinegar instead of oil." (It seems that there was a little oil left in the cups and she intended to add new oil, but instead added vinegar. They lit, but she expected the candles to go out any minute.)

Rabbi Chanina answered his daughter, "What do you care? The One who decreed that oil should burn should decree that vinegar should burn!" The Sages taught. The vinegar burned throughout the next day until they took the flame for Havdalah from it.

We see that for Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa, oil didn't just "naturally" burn. *Each second that it burned*, Rabbi Chanina saw the miracle of Hashem making it burn for that second. Rabbi Chanina's awareness of Hashem was at such a high level that he saw Hashem's hand in every aspect of life and in every "natural" process. For someone like that, there is no such thing as nature - everything is Hashem, and there is truly no difference between lighting oil or vinegar. Since it is the will of Hashem at that very moment that is causing the oil to burn, He can do the same for vinegar; one is no more difficult than the other. Had Hashem so decided, vinegar could have

been the stuff that we use for lighting our candles and oil would have been used for cleaning and making pickles.

This brings us to a deeper level of how to understand nature. It superficially seems to us that nature is forever set and cannot change. At Creation it was established, set into motion, and continues operating from then, on its own. Nature appears to be like a table built by a carpenter. Once the carpenter builds it, it no longer needs him to keep it together. It will last for many years without him ever needing to service it.

We see from Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa that this is *not* how nature works. Rather, Hashem is creating nature one nanosecond at a time since the beginning of creation. **All of nature** is simply one constant miracle from Hashem, Who creates the world and everything in it every moment of every day. We say this numerous times in our daily prayers. During the morning service, for example:

הַמְחִידֵשׁ בְּטוֹבוֹ בְּכָל יוֹם תְּמִיד מְעֻשָׂה בְּרֵאשִׁית.

In His goodness, Hashem daily renews creation.

If Hashem did not consciously and continuously wish the world and everything in it to exist, it would not. But, because the world works so flawlessly, everything seems to work on its own, and we tend to think that it is automatic and operates by itself. Yet, the reality is that all of nature is only Hashem's constant miracle happening every moment of every day.

Attached to each of our homes are three braided electric wires coming from the outside electric pole. They pass through the electric meter and connect to the circuit or breaker box that controls the flow of electricity to each of the house's outlets and light fixtures. We plug all of our appliances and electrical devices into the outlets and turn on the lights by just flicking the switch on the wall.

A five-year-old child wakes up every morning, turns on his bedroom light, and sees the different electrical gadgets in his room lit up around him.

As he makes his way into the kitchen for breakfast, he will take cold milk for his cereal from the refrigerator and his warm toast from the toaster.

One morning, when he switches on the bedroom light, it doesn't go on. Indeed, the whole house is dark. The refrigerator isn't humming, and the toaster doesn't work. Wait a minute! Nothing works! He asks his mother, "Mom, why doesn't my light work? Why doesn't the clock tick? What is going on?" His mother calmly tells him, "My dear son, there was a storm last night, and we lost power. The electric company says that we should have it back by 3:00 this afternoon. Then, everything should go back to normal and work again."

You can well imagine the questions that will enter this child's mind. *You mean that these things don't "just work on their own?" They need electricity to power them? Where is it? How come I never saw it! I never knew that!*

Just as our lights, appliances, and electronic devices continuously require electricity to operate, so, too, the world needs Hashem to keep it running. Hashem is the universe's "juice." And just like when the electricity goes out everything goes dead, so, too, if Hashem decided to cut off His input into the world, everything would go dead; literally, all would fall apart.

Before electricity, a burning candle was the metaphor for something that needed constant fuel. When we see a candle burning, the flame looks so solid - as if it will last forever; and given enough fuel, it actually will. Despite this, we know, that the moment that the fuel runs out, the flame will die. The flame that we observe now is only burning from the oil or wax drawn up the wick a second ago. When there is no more oil, the flame must go out. Therefore, the Channukah candles' miraculous burning for eight days teaches us that nature is like a candle that requires a new drop of fuel every second, and Hashem is behind the scenes powering the world.

While this is an invaluable lesson, what is its connection to Chanukah? Why specifically on Chanukah did our Sages teach us this lesson?

The Midrash on the Torah's second verse describes the four exiles that the Jewish people will experience:

מדרש רבה בראשית - פרשה ב פסקה ד

(ד) ר"ש בן לקיש פתר קריא בגליות והארץ היתה תהו זה גלות בבל שנאמר (ירמיה ד) ראיתי את הארץ והנה תהו ובהו זה גלות מדי (אסתר ו) ויבהילו להביא את המן וחושך זה גלות יון שהחשיכה עיניהם של ישראל בגזירותיהן שהיתה אומרת להם כתבו על קרן השור שאין לכם חלק באלהי ישראל על פני תהום זה גלות ממלכת הרשעה שאין להם חקר כמו התהום

*Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish explained the verse as referring to the upcoming exiles: תהו refers to Bavel (Babylonia), ובהו refers to Persia and the Meads, וחושך - and **darkness** – refers to the Greeks who darkened the eyes of the Jewish people with their decrees and made us write on the horn of an ox, "We have no part of the G-d of Israel."*

How ironic! The world considers the Greeks as the founders of the "enlightenment" for having brought the world philosophy, math, the scientific method, the arts, culture, and yet the Sages refer to them as "**darkness?**" What is the meaning of this?

The Greeks believed that the world always existed and had no creator. Contrary to the pagans before them, they began using their intellect to examine the systems of nature in the world and figuring out how they worked. The entire set of seemingly natural systems that control our world is subject to scientific laws that govern it and dictate how it works. The study of physics, biology, chemistry, medicine, and mathematics attempts to organize and quantify the laws of nature so that they can be understood and manipulated. We use the *scientific method*, a system of principles and procedures designed to ascertain accurate data as to the world around us, for this task. We are the beneficiaries of centuries of this great work, as we enjoy so many conveniences of scientific discovery.

Thanks to the study of aerodynamics, we can travel to the other side of the world in a few hours. Thanks to nanotechnology we tote cell phones with more computing power than early computers that took up entire buildings. So many once deadly maladies no longer exist thanks to medical research. All of this scientific progress began with the Greeks and their analysis of nature. They worshiped the perfection in nature and the perfection of the human body and its prowess. In the context of Greek scientific research, anything that could not be sensed by one of the five senses and could not be observed and measured did not exist. Yet science can only deal with material phenomena, which through research can be quantified and manipulated, providing evidence for a clear scientific conclusion. Therefore, ironically, Hashem, Who is completely spiritual, the Creator and source of the Universe's existence every second, had no place in the Greek worldview. (Or as the great early 19th century French scientist Pierre-Simon Laplace once remarked regarding the Creator's role in the Universe, "I had no need of that hypothesis.")

This tidal wave of Greek culture swept through the Land of Israel also, captivating most of the Jewish people, except for a small handful of Jews who rejected out of hand the Greek worldview. These Jews claimed that Hashem created the world and gave us His Torah, a body of wisdom superior to the Greek's. The Torah's wisdom came straight from the Creator of the Universe. The Torah contains all wisdom and provides the Jewish people with a holy lifestyle based on its teachings. The performance of mitzvot and the study of Torah make the Jewish people into a holy nation. The Jewish people had no need for a new lifestyle or "education" for they had been studying the deepest educational texts for thousands of years!

The Greeks vehemently opposed these ideas. They claimed that there is no Creator. Since He cannot be detected with any of our five senses, He cannot exist. They felt that their wisdom is superior, for it is tangible and verifiable. The scientific method is empirical and cannot be falsified. In the

Greek world, a miracle such as what happened on Chanukah is simply impossible. Scientific experimentation will show that when using the same size wick, a half an ounce of oil will burn for an hour. There is no possibility for deviation from this. It is a scientific fact established through rigorous testing.

This was Greek philosophy. "If I cannot sense it with one of my five senses, it is not a reality."

Nachmanides writes: (Vayikra 16:8)

ולא אוכל לפרש כי היינו צריכים לחסום פי המתחכמים בטבע הנמשכים אחרי היוני אשר הכחיש כל דבר זולתי המורגש לו, והגיס דעתו לחשוב הוא ותלמידיו הרשעים, כי כל ענין שלא השיג אליו הוא בסברתו איננו אמת :

For I (Nachmanides) needed to squelch those who know much about nature and follow the path of Aristotle who denied the existence of anything that he could not experience with his senses and who was so haughty as to think, he and his evil students, that anything that he could not comprehend with his mind was untrue.

The Greeks lived in a world that denied that electricity existed. Can anyone see the electricity as it comes into the home or as it powers your device? Because Hashem never turned it off, they never experienced a loss of power, so they go through life denying that there is any "juice" needed to power the world. It just operates on its own, with no source of power necessary.

וחשך - and darkness – refers to the Greeks (midrash, cited above)

The metaphor is perfect. Darkness obscures from sight what is clearly present. Imagine a ballroom set for a banquet, its tables laden with delicious foods and delicacies. The food is piping hot, ready to be eaten; hot soup and freshly perked coffee. There are pastries topped with cream, and truffles with fruit fillings. There are boxes of expensive gifts and jewelry valued at hundreds of thousands of dollars set on one of the tables. There is

only one catch. The room is pitch black. One peering into that room would swear that there is nothing there; after all, he cannot see it. When he enters, he trips on a myriad of obstacles, chairs, tables, and flowers. He burns himself on the hot soup into which he accidentally put his hand and gets all gooey from the cream on the pastries. He is cursing his luck for all the difficulties that he is experiencing in this treacherous world. But that is only because he is in the dark and doesn't acknowledge electricity and would never think of flicking on the light switch near the room's entrance. A mere flick of the switch would reveal the magnificent feast set out especially for him, if he only believed in electricity.

Hashem's brilliance and ingenuity are evident in every creation in the Creation, and He continuously keeps it going. His love and care are behind every event in our lives, and the good that He has prepared for us is beyond our ability to comprehend.

But we live in the world of the Greeks: darkness. Because they do not see it with their senses, Hashem is not a reality. The Greek world does not brook the possibility of a miracle. A wick of a certain thickness, placed in oil, will burn one half ounce per hour. This is science, confirmed by experimental evidence, which cannot change.

Living in this world without Hashem is to live in a suffering world. Nothing makes sense. There is neither rhyme nor reason behind anything. It is a dark world with no light, prone to accidents and mishaps. Living with Hashem, contrariwise, is living in reality where everything has purpose and meaning. It is directly from Hashem, and intended for our good, and for us to learn from. It is a life of opportunity and goodness.

Many, if not most, of the Jews during the Second Temple were attracted to the Greek philosophy and approach to science. It looked so solid. Its truth could be proven by experiments. Man can fly to the moon. Man cured illnesses. How could anybody argue with science? The reasoning

is powerful, and it caused most Jews to abandon the Torah perspective on life and follow the Greek “enlightenment.”

The miracle of the oil of the menorah proved the Torah approach. Hashem showed clearly that oil burns just because Hashem has said that it should burn. And it can burn as long as Hashem decides that it should. The miracle of the oil restored the reality of the Torah, that Hashem controls nature, and that nature inherently constitutes a miracle.

This is the significance of the Chanukah miracle that is so “*enlightening*” and relevant today. We too live in a world with so much darkness. There is so much evil surrounding us. There is so much evil directed at us. It all seeks to deny Hashem’s existence.

When we light our menorahs and contemplate the miracle of the oil burning for eight days when it should have burned for only one, we should deeply appreciate that Hashem is behind the scenes making it happen. We should also recognize that this is the story of the Jewish people. By every law of nature, after so many attempts to annihilate us, we should not be here to light the menorah. We should be an exhibit in some museum like the Greeks and Romans of old. The miracle of the oil and the miracle of our existence refute the Greek worldview and proves that Hashem is behind nature; for without Him, we and it would not be here to celebrate the Chanukah holiday. The little flame of our menorah dispels all the darkness in the world because it tells us that Hashem’s light is behind the scenes. He has a plan and it is all for the good.

With that thought, our hearts should fill with joy and praise! Joy that we live in Hashem’s world, and praise that ***we are of the few who are privileged to know that we live in Hashem’s world.*** How much light this little candle casts on our lives. It is the proof that Hashem is running the world every second and I am in His loving and capable hands. Happy Chanukah!!