



Partners In Torah
San Diego Study Guide

תשפ"ג Chanukah

Authored by Rabbi Avi Cohen
Partners Detroit

12/20/2022

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.

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.

Before coming to Partners this evening, we lit the third Chanukah candle. The one flask of oil, which should have fueled the candles for only one day, miraculously lasted for a full eight. Jews the world over lit their menorahs to celebrate the third consecutive day that the oil burned. We started with one candle on the first night and add 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 (Shabbat 21b) asks, “מאי חנוכה?” *What is Chanukah?* Rashi explains the question: על איזה נס קבעוהו? *For which miracle did they (the Sages) establish it?*

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 should only have burned for one. So, for which miracle was it principally established?

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 ועשאו 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 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 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 all have a mitzvah to light a menorah to commemorate the eight days that the menorah miraculously remained lit.

We also fulfill the mitzvah of praise and thanksgiving to Hashem, by reciting the full 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 we be praising Hashem, and 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 הניסים* (*Al hanissim*) prayer that is added to the Amidah and to the Birkat Hamazon during Channukah, we say:

עַל הַנִּסִּים וְעַל הַפְּרָקוֹן וְעַל הַגְּבוּרוֹת וְעַל הַתְּשׁוּעוֹת וְעַל הַמְּלַחְמוֹת שְׁעָשִׂיתָ לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ
בְּיָמֵם הָהֵם בְּזִמְנֵי 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 located undefiled bottle of oil had enough oil to burn for one night, its burning the first night was not a miracle. The miracle only started the *second* night and continued for the next seven nights until pure oil could be produced. 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 really a miracle; the oil *should* have burned for that day! But the Sages want us to appreciate that even when oil burns, it is a miracle. What miracle is there when oil burns? Isn’t that natural?

Of course, it's natural. But, ***all of nature*** is a miracle from Hashem, Who recreates the world and everything in it every second of every day. We say this numerous times in our daily prayers.

הַמְחִידֵשׁ בְּטוֹבוֹ בְּכָל יוֹם תְּמִיד מַעֲשֵׂה בְּרָאשִׁית.

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 disintegrate. Because the world works so flawlessly, and everything seems to work on its own, we tend to think that it is automatic and happens by itself. Yet the reality is that all of nature is really Hashem's constant miracle happening every moment of every day.

When Rabbi Chaninah ben Dosa saw his daughter looking upset one Friday afternoon, he asked her, "Why are you upset?" She answered, "By mistake, I put vinegar in the Shabbat candles instead of oil." (There was a little oil left, but it would soon go out.) Rabbi Chanina told her, "Don't be concerned. Whoever told oil to light, will tell vinegar to light!" The "vinegar" candles, the Talmud tells us, not only remained ignited the entire Shabbat, but they even provided a flame for Havdalah.

Our Sages explain that when Rabbi Chaninah ben Dosa saw oil burn, he did not see "nature." He saw a miracle from Hashem! So, in that perspective vinegar could also burn.

Attached to each of our homes are three braided electric wires coming from the electric pole outside. It passes through the meter and connects to the circuit or breaker box that controls the flow of electricity to each of the outlets and light fixtures in the house. We plug all our appliances and electrical devices into the outlets and turn on the lights by 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 lit up around him. As he makes his way into the kitchen for breakfast, he will take the 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 require electricity to operate, so, too, the world needs Hashem to keep it humming. Hashem is the universe's "juice." And just as 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.

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, וחשך - 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 crowns the Greeks as the beginning of the enlightenment, their having brought us philosophy, math, the scientific method, the arts, and culture. All academia today is based on the foundations of the Greeks and the Roman empire that followed; 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. So, they began examining and figuring out the world's various natural systems and 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 the sciences, such as physics, biology, 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. Ironically, Hashem, the Creator of all this, and the source of its existence every second, was nowhere in the Greek picture.

This tidal wave of Greek culture swept through Israel also, captivating most of the Jewish people, except for a small handful of Jews who rejected out of hand the Greek way of life. 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 does not 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 world of the Greeks, a miracle such as what happened on Chanukah is simply impossible. Scientific experimentation will show that using the same 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.

חושך - and darkness – refers to the Greeks (midrash)

The metaphor is perfect. Darkness obscures from sight what is present. There is a ballroom set for a banquet, with its tables laden with delicious food and delicacies. The food is piping hot, ready to be eaten, with 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 will never think of flicking the light switch on the wall near the entrance. A 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 no rhyme or reason behind anything. It is a dark world with no light prone to accidents and mishaps. Living with Hashem, 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.

Before electricity, a burning candle provided the metaphor for something needing 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. In spite of this, we know that the moment that the fuel runs out, the flame dies. The flame that we observe now is burning from the oil drawn up the wick a second ago. When there is no more oil to fuel the flame, it must go out. A candle is a metaphor for Hashem powering the world every moment.

Many, if not most, of the Jews in the time of 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. You can cure 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 was proof positive to the Torah approach. Hashem showed clearly that oil burns 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. When we light our menorahs, we should contemplate that Hashem is behind nature, and that if Hashem were not there to wish the candle to burn at this moment, we and it would not be here to celebrate the Chanukah holiday. 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.

When we say the Hallel in the morning, our hearts should be filled with praise and gratitude to Hashem for allowing us to stand before Him to praise and thank Him.

Chanukah comes in the middle of winter’s dark days. Dark overcast days yield to an early nightfall. In the cold of winter, it is hard not to feel chilly and alone. The light of the menorah shining from the

window sill into the night does much to dispel the darkness. Knowing that Hashem is behind its light penetrates the greatest strongholds of despair and creates hope. There wasn't enough pure oil to last for more than one day, yet, miraculously, it did. Hashem is here, Hashem is with you.

This is also the hallmark of the Jewish people. By the numbers, the Jewish nation represent .22 of 1% of the human beings living on our planet. By all logic, we should not exist, especially after so many attempts to annihilate us! After being scattered over the four corners of the earth without a common homeland, we should not be here at all. But we are.

The Chanukah menorah teaches us that the Jewish nation is not subject to the laws of nature. We are in Hashem's hands, and He protects us from our enemies. Just as the oil did not follow the laws of nature and miraculously burned many fold its natural ability, so, too, the Jewish nation continues to exist and will always exist, against all odds.

When we light the menorah this year, let our hearts fill with joy that we have the privilege to light the menorah, indicating that we understand and appreciate that Hashem is behind everything that happens in this world, on a national and personal basis. If we see things this way, the light from the Chanukah candle will light up our world with the most brilliant light possible. Happy Chanukah!