



Partners In Torah

San Diego-Los Angeles-Ventura

Take home Dvar Torah

תשפ"ה Chanukah

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By: Rabbi Avi Cohen

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.

Tomorrow night, we will kindle the first Chanukah candle. We celebrate the eight-day Chanukah holiday by lighting an eight-branch menorah, each branch representing one night of the holiday. By daily adding another candle, we acknowledge the miracle of the Temple menorah's light that burned continuously for eight days when there was oil enough only for one.

Chanukah is unusual in that no biblical book chronicles its events; instead, we light the menorah. On Purim we read the Megillah, and the other festivals have the Torah itself to describe the holiday's events, which we read on those days. Why is there no biblical book for Chanukah, and how do the candles capture the holiday's essence?

Chanukah lacks its own book because its events occurred after prophecy had ceased, and for a book to be included in the written Torah, Hashem needs to have told the information to a prophet who then transcribed it. Only information ultimately coming directly from Hashem can constitute Torah. Because at the time of the Chanukah miracle prophecy no longer existed, there could be no holy book to chronicle the events .

This brings us to the intriguing question of when and why did prophecy stop? Why were there no prophets at the time of Chanukah?

Prophets and prophecy were common in the Jewish nation from the Torah's giving at Sinai in the year 2448 from Creation, and for the next 1,000 years. At Sinai, the entire Jewish nation became prophets as they heard the first two commandments directly from Hashem. Indeed, the ultimate spiritual level that a person could achieve in life was to become a prophet, to become so holy that Hashem Himself would communicate directly with him. The Talmud teaches us (Megillah 14a) that there were about one 1,200,000 (!) prophets during the thousand years of prophecy, which means that about 1,200 people would become prophets each year. Being that a prophet lived a holy life, he probably lived to be 90 or

100 years old, putting the number of prophets alive at the same time at over 100,000! Had you lived then, without a doubt, you would have known a prophet.

Despite prophets seemingly being everywhere, the written Torah (more accurately, the Tanach) has only 24 official books. The Talmud explains that only the prophecies that had relevance for the future were written down. The other prophecies constitute private information that did not become part of the written Torah.

Why did prophesy stop? Why can't the holy people of today reach the level of prophesy?

Prophesy had to stop when the Men of the Great Assembly put an end to idol worship. The story is told in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 64a).

ויזעקו בקול גדול אל ה' אלקיהם מאי אמור אמר רב יהודה ואיתימא רבי יונתן בייא בייא היינו דאחרביה לביתא וקליא להיכלא וקטלינהו לצדיקי ואגלינהו לישראל מארעייהו ועדיין הוא מרקד בין כלום יהבתיה לן אלא לקבולי ביה אגרא לא איהו בעינן ולא אגריה בעינן בתר דאביקו ביה יתבו תלתא יומא בתעניתא בעו רחמי נפל להו פיתקא מרקיעא דהוה כתיב בה אמת אמר רבי חנינא שמע מינה חותמו של הקדוש ברוך הוא אמת נפק כגוריא דנורא מבית קדשי הקדשים אמר להו נביא לישראל היינו יצרא דעבודה זרה בהדי דקתפסי ליה אישתמיט ביניתא מיניה ואזל קליה בארבע מאה פרסי אמרו היכי ניעבד דילמא משמיא מרחמי עליה אמר להו נביא שדיוהו בדודא דאברא וכסיוה באברא דשייף קליה

The verse in Nechemiah 9:4 says:

“And they [the Men of the Great Assembly, Rashi] screamed in a loud voice to Hashem their G-d.” *What were they saying? Rabbi Yehuda, and some say it was Rabbi Yochanan, said, “Whoa! Whoa! This [The evil inclination for idol worship, Rashi] is who destroyed our Temple, burned down our sanctuary, killed all the righteous people, and exiled the Jewish people from their land, and he is still dancing among us. You gave us this*

challenge so that we would overcome it and receive reward for it, but we don't want the challenge and we don't want the reward." After they wrestled with it, they fasted for three days and asked Hashem for mercy to give him into their hands. A note fell from heaven upon which it said, "True." [I, Hashem, agree, Rashi] A "lion cub" of fire came out of the holy of holies. The prophet told them, "That's the evil inclination for idol worship!" As they were catching it, a hair of its mane fell off, and it screamed so loud its screaming could be heard four hundred miles away. They said, "What are we going to do about this? It is screaming so loud, Hashem may have mercy on him!" The prophet told them, "Put him in a lead container and cover it with a lead covering. This will muffle its voice."

We are at a loss to understand how any person with a modicum of intelligence could bow down to an idol. How could this stone or wooden image have any spiritual (or any other) powers at all? It was the creation of a sculptor or a carpenter! None of us has ever had even the slightest inclination to bow down to a statue sitting on a neighbor's lawn or a sculpture in a museum. How could intelligent people ever do such a thing? The reason that we cannot understand this is because we live after the evil inclination for idol worship was eliminated. If we had lived before that, things would be quite different. This is illustrated in the following story from the Talmud (Sanhedrin 102b).

The background of this story is the Mishna (Sanhedrin 90a):

Three kings of Israel have no portion in the world to come, Yiravam, Achav, and **Menashe**. The reason is that they led the people to follow idols instead of Hashem. Rav Ashi was teaching his class when he reached this point in the Mishna. It was time to break, so Rav Ashi told the students.

רב אשי אוקי אשלשה מלכים אמר למחר נפתח בחברין אתא מנשה איתחזי ליה
בחלמיה אמר חברך וחבירי דאבוך קרית לן מהיכא בעית למישרא המוציא אמר ליה

לא ידענא אמר ליה מהיכא דבעית למישרא המוציא לא גמירת וחברך קרית לן אמר ליה אגמריה לי ולמחר דרישנא ליה משמך בפירקא אמר ליה מהיכא דקרים בישולא אמר ליה מאחר דחכימתו כולי האי מאי טעמא קא פלחיתו לעבודת כוכבים אמר ליה אי הות התם הות נקיטנא בשיפולי גלימא ורהטת אבתראי

Rav Ashi told his students, "Tomorrow we will begin the class with our three friends" (the three kings).

Menashe, the king of Israel, appeared to him in his dream and said to him. "Your friend and the friend of your father called me? Where do you cut the loaf of bread when you make the blessing on it?" he asked.

Rav Ashi answered, "I don't know."

"You don't even know the proper place to cut the bread when you make the blessing on it, and you have the nerve to call me your friend?!" Asked Menashe.

"Tell me where, and tomorrow I will teach it to my class in your name!" said Rav Ashi.

"In the crispiest spot!" replied Menashe.

Rav Ashi then asked, "Since you are so learned in Torah, how is it possible that you worshipped idols?"

Menashe responded, "If you were there [during the time when I lived], you would have picked up the coattails of your coats to run after the idols!" (We at least walked with dignity) "You can't imagine what it was like to have an evil inclination for idols. We kept all the laws of the Torah! We made blessings, kept the Shabbat, put on tefillin, etc., but we also worshipped idols. Had you lived in my time, you would have run after them as well!"

What does all this have to do with prophesy? Everything. Let me explain.

Maimonides writes (Laws of Idol Worship 1:1):

(א) בימי אנוש טעו בני האדם טעות גדול ונבערה עצת חכמי אותו הדור ואנוש עצמו מן הטועים היה וזו היתה טעותם אמרו הואיל והאלהים ברא כוכבים אלו וגלגלים להנהיג את העולם ונתנם במרום וחלק להם כבוד והם שמשים המשמשים לפניו ראויין הם לשבחם ולפארם ולחלוק להם כבוד וזהו רצון האל ברוך הוא לגדל ולכבד מי שגדלו וכבדו כמו שהמלך רוצה לכבד העומדים לפניו וזהו כבודו של מלך כיון שעלה דבר זה על לבם התחילו לבנות לכוכבים היכלות ולהקריב להן קרבנות ולשבחם ולפארם בדברים ולהשתחוות למולם כדי להשיג רצון הבורא בדעתם הרעה וזה היה עיקר עבודת כוכבים וכך היו אומרים עובדיה היודעים עיקרה לא שהן אומרים שאין שם אלוה אלא כוכב זה הוא שירמיהו אומר מי לא ייראך מלך הגוים כי לך יאתה כי בכל חכמי הגוים ובכל מלכותם מאין כמוך ובאחת יבערו ויכסלו מוסר הבלים עץ הוא כלומר הכל יודעים שאתה הוא לבדך אבל טעותם וכסילותם שמדמים שזה ההבל רצונך הוא

In the days of Enosh [Adam's grandson] people made a grave mistake: They thought that since Hashem had created all the stars and celestial beings to control the world [more about this later] and honored them by placing them in the highest places, since they are Hashem's officials, it is appropriate to praise and exalt them and give them honor. Hashem would want us to honor those whom He chose to honor, just as every king wants his ambassador to be respected, and, with this, we honor Hashem also. Once they thought of this, they started building temples to those stars to bring them sacrifices and to bow down and praise them.

As time went on, charlatans arose and said, "Hashem told me that we have to worship a certain star, and that star appeared to me and revealed the proper way to worship him." They would invent an image and say this is an image of what it looked like. So, people started worshipping those images of the stars. After a while, they forgot about Hashem, and it was only the image that they worshipped.

What was their mistake? Where was the flaw in their logic? When the emissary of a king or president travels to a foreign nation, he *does* want his representative to be respected. So why does Maimonides say that they made a grave mistake?

The answer is that when the emissary travels, the king wants him to have respect, but not when the king himself is present! Giving honor to a secondary official in the king's presence constitutes treason! In the king's presence no one gets respect except the king. Therefore, since Hashem is ever-present, it is inappropriate to give honor to anyone but Him.

This is what it says in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:3).

(ג) לֹא יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל פְּנֵי:

You shall not recognize the gods of others in my presence.

Since I, Hashem, am ever present, it is never acceptable to have other gods.

This still sounds weird. Why would they worship a star, the sun, or the moon? What can these objects possibly do?

Our Sages teach us that Hashem runs the world through the stars. They are Hashem's messengers, the sources that provide the sustenance for the myriad of this world's needs. Although they necessarily receive from Hashem everything that they bestow, they are still the dispensers. This concept is stated clearly in the writings of Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato (d. 1746).

ספר דעת תבונות - צו - קכה

והנה דוגמא לזה הוא השפעת הכוכבים, שידענו שהולידה כל עניני העולם התחתון הזה, וכמאמרם ז"ל (בראשית רבה י, ו), "אין לך כל עשב ועשב מלמטה שאין לו מזל ברקיע שמכה בו ואומר לו גדל. ואמנם, אלה משפיעים לפי החוק שהטביע בם האל ית', ומשפיעים רק מה שמקבלים ממנו ית' אך האל ית' הוא מקור כל השפע הנשפע.

An example of this is the influence of the stars. We know that they gave birth to all the matters of this world, as the Sages told us, "There isn't a blade of grass that doesn't have an angel in heaven that is hitting

it and telling it to grow.” However, they can influence only to the degree that Hashem has placed in them, and they can give forth only what Hashem has put in them to give. Hashem remains the real source of all blessing that exists.

Hashem has a system of angels and stars that were created to do His bidding. There is an angel for every blade of grass and for every other creation in the world. Everything emanates from Hashem through His system of messengers whose job it is to fulfill His wishes.

Before elimination of the evil inclination for idol worship, people were able to expand their souls into the heavens and actually perceive that the stars and angels were indeed the source of their bounty. They could even identify which star or which angel was in charge of which blessing. The idol they made resembled the image of the angel they were worshipping and helped them focus their thoughts on the angel. When a person would pray to, or worship that star or angel through focusing on its material image, the star or angel would dispense its blessing to that person. Because this worked consistently, people came to believe that the stars were gods - since they were the apparent source of their blessing. We now understand why this is unacceptable. The star is only the *dispenser* for the blessing, which originates with Hashem. Treating the star as the source of the bounty perforce denies Hashem as the true source of blessing and gives the credit to the middleman.

What is the allure to using the stars directly instead of going to Hashem, the real source? Why was idol worship so prevalent and attractive? For one, there was the “cause and effect” factor; when they prayed to the star, they received what they prayed for, and because it worked every time, it seemed like the star was the source. Secondly, when one prays to Hashem, there isn’t always an immediate response, and, sometimes, there seems to be no response at all. The reason for this is that Hashem has only our best interest in mind and, if it is not the best thing for us, He won’t give it to us at all. Also, perhaps we need to come a little closer to Hashem before we are worthy of His blessing. Hashem wants a relationship with us, and going to the middleman creates a

disconnect between man and Hashem. It's like a child who, instead of asking his father for something, steals his credit card and buys what he wants, circumventing his father's wisdom and advice. The star, on the other hand, couldn't care less if it is good for you or not, it is just the dispenser. So, it will give it to you every time, no matter what.

This spiritual ability to expand their souls into the heavens proved to be too great a challenge to the Jewish people, and idol worship took over. The Men of the Great Assembly then decided that they needed to remove it. Because of this, we no longer have a clue as to what goes on in the heavenly spiritual realms, even though we know that Hashem operates the world through his agents and angels.

This very same spiritual power, the ability to expand one's soul into the heavens and see how everything emanates from Hashem, is what enabled a holy person to achieve prophecy. An idolater would stop halfway and dwell on the star of his choosing, making it his god. A holy person would follow a straight path directly to Hashem and create a connection with Him that would be manifest in Hashem communicating with him through prophesy. When the Men of the Great Assembly removed this power, they also closed the door on prophesy, since they use the same 'spiritual staircase'. Additionally, there would be an insurmountable imbalance between the powers of good and evil if prophesy remained and there was no opposing option.

It is interesting to note that until the termination of idol worship and prophesy, there was no such thing as atheism, only idol worship. That spiritual realms existed was not something that anyone could deny since everyone knew someone who had access to it. It was only a question of whether you were on the right track. But once the spiritual realms became closed off, it became possible to deny their existence, and the existence of Hashem altogether.

The end of prophesy corresponded with rise of Alexander the Great. The Midrash tells us:

ברייתא דסדר עולם רבה - פרק ל

והצפיר והשעיר מלך יון וגו' הוא המלך הראשון (דניאל ח') ועמד מלך גבור וגו' ובעמדו תשבר וגו' (שם י"א) הוא אלכסנדרוס מוקדון שמלך י"ב שנה. עד כאן היו הנביאים מתנבאים ברוח הקדש מכאן ואילך הט אזנך ושמע דברי חכמים שנא' (משלי כ"ב) כי נעים כי תשמרם בבטנך

“And as he rises, he will fall” (Daniel 8:12) – this is a reference to Alexander the Great who reigned for only 12 years. Until now, prophets would prophesy with Divine spirit, from now on, tilt your ear and listen to the words of the Sages.

The cessation of prophesy is what caused Greek philosophers to place all their emphasis on the physical world without allowing any possibility for spirituality. Once the spiritual realms were hidden away, one could easily deny their existence. The Greeks took this to the extreme and denied the existence of anything that could not be observed or sensed with one of the five senses, measured, or experimented with.

This is why the Sages referred to the Greek empire as “darkness.” The Midrash on the second verse in the Torah 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, 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. They made us write on the horn of an ox, “We have no part of the G-d of Israel.”

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 sense 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 world ironically 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. In a strong way, we live in a culture that mirrors the Greek perspective on the world. So many today accept the absurd idea that the magnificent world that we live in came about without a Creator through many random steps. Despite that by all scientific calculations the chance of this happening is zero (many books by leading scientists have been written to illustrate this), because an intelligent Creator is simply not a possibility, they remain in the dark.

The Torah teaches us that all of nature is in Hashem's hands. Yes, for the most part, it functions smoothly, and you can count on it to work consistently. But when Hashem wants to change it, He can. "Nature" is simply Hashem's most constant miracle.

The Torah also teaches us that there is holiness and spirituality in the world that cannot be measured or experienced with the five senses. It is felt and experienced by the soul. Spirituality is the source of all reality. The Greeks had a problem with this idea. "Holiness," did you say? What is that? Where can you see holiness? Spirituality? How do you measure it? How much does it weigh? If it is not subject to the scientific method,

it has no reality. So went the argument between the Sages and the Greeks.

To this end, the Greeks imposed laws designed to uproot the concept of holiness from the Jewish people, which is why they targeted only four of the commandments: Shabbat, Torah study, Brit Milah, and Rosh Chodesh.

The Torah declares that Shabbat is a holy day. Shabbat transforms every Jew, no matter what his vocation during the week, into a holy person. He lives his entire week for the day when he can elevate himself above the mundane and spend time with his Creator. Because gentiles cannot experience Shabbat's holiness, they claimed it was a day like any other.

The Torah is holy, and the study of the Torah, Hashem's holy words, makes a person holy. A Torah Sage is a holy person.

The Talmud (Megillah 8a) tells us that King Ptolemy II took 72 Sages, and, without telling them why, put them into 72 different rooms. He then entered each room, telling each Sage to translate the Torah into Greek. Hashem then placed the identical ideas into their minds, and all the Sages translated the Torah exactly the same. The Greeks were not interested in learning our holy Torah. Rather, they wanted access to it so they could show that it was book like any other and that it isn't holy. The Sages say that the day that the Torah was translated into Greek was as bad as the day on which the first Tablets were broken. This is because, in a sense, the Torah became broken. It now could be looked at like any other book, devoid of its Divinity with its many interpretations and nuances.

Brit Milah is a sign on the body of a Jewish man signifying his special holy connection to his Creator, instilling holiness into the body of a Jewish

male, enabling him to control his earthy desires and live a holy life. The Greeks denied this, too.

Finally, they outlawed Rosh Chodesh, the declaring of the beginning of the new month by the high court. Rosh Chodesh (the first day of the month) fixed the schedule for the holidays, which start on specific days of the month. Pesach with its inherent holiness, for example, begins on the 15th of Nissan. To determine that, we need to know when the first of Nissan occurred, which the Sages determine. This takes the concept a step further, since the court determines the day the holiness of Passover will be bestowed upon the world.

This is exactly what we say in the blessing we say in the prayers on the festivals.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, מְקַדֵּשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהַזְמַנִּים:

Blessed are you Hashem, who sanctifies the Jewish people, who sanctify the times.

Many of the Jews in the time of the Second Temple were attracted to the Greek philosophy and approach to science. It looks so solid. You can prove its truth through experiments. Man can fly to the moon. You can cure illnesses. How could anybody argue with science? The reasoning is powerful, and it caused a lot of Jews to abandon the Torah perspective on life and become Greeks. The Jewish religion was in severe danger. Only a handful of Jews remained loyal to the Torah and its teachings. Among them were Matityahu and his 12 sons, who were prepared to sacrifice everything to save Judaism.

The Greek world brooks no possibility of a miracle. A wick of a specific thickness placed in oil will consume exactly one-half ounce of oil per hour. This is science, confirmed by experimental evidence. It cannot change.

The miracle of the oil of the menorah was proof positive to the Torah approach. Hashem showed clearly that oil burns exclusively because Hashem has said that it should burn. And it will 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.

One Friday evening, Rabbi Chaninah ben Dosa saw his daughter looking upset. 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 burn will tell vinegar to burn!” The “vinegar” candles burned for the entire Shabbat, and they provided a flame for Havdalah also. (Talmud Taanit 25a)

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

This is why the miracle of the candles that burned for eight days epitomizes the essence of the Chanukah holiday. Chanukah celebrates the victory of the Torah approach to nature over the Greek perspective on nature.

When we light our menorahs commemorating the miracle of the oil burning for eight days, we are stating that we understand that Hashem controls nature, and that when oil burns, it does so because Hashem created it to. With this we also acknowledge that it is He who is behind our every blessing and that we owe everything to Him.

Chanukah was established as a holiday of “thanksgiving to Hashem.” What exactly should we thank Him for? The miracle of the candles? What did that do for us?

A lot. It gave us the understanding that Hashem controls nature and that all blessing comes directly from Him. He has chosen to give it to us, His beloved children. How thankful we are to be the recipients of Hashem's love and blessings. Happy Chanukah!!