



RABBI CHAYIM SOLOVEICHIK

Rav Kehilat Ohr Shalom Ramat Beit Shemesh,
Rebbe Reishit Yerushalayim and Ohr Moshe Bet Shemesh

מאי חנוכה - What is Chanukah?

As we observe the festival of Chanukah, we should try to understand the achievement that we are celebrating from more than two thousand years ago. One of the main components of Chanukah is reciting the Al Hanisim. From the Al Hanisim it seems that even though the Jews were able to return to the Beit Hamikdash the achievements we celebrate are not Beit Hamikdash centered. The Al Hanisim tells us how the wicked Greeks tried to make the Jews forget the Torah and stop doing Mitzvot. The Al Hanisim continues that G-d performed a great salvation and due to that salvation we were able to

return to Torah, mitzvot and the Beit Hamikdash.

When one learns the Gemara in Mesechet Shabbat, a different story is painted. The Gemara asks what the miracle of Chanukah is about. The Gemara answers that when the Greeks came into the Beit Hamikdash they contaminated all the oil and when the Chashmonaim were victorious they were able to find one pitcher of oil with enough oil for one day and it lasted eight days. Due to this miracle the chachamim enacted the holiday of Chanukah. From the Gemara it seems that Chanukah is a holiday which is totally Beit Hamikdash centered which forces the question of why do we celebrate Chanukah today when we unfortunately do not have a Beit Hamikdash.

From the Gemara and the Al Hanisim it is clear that the Jews were not able to keep the mitzvot like they wanted whether it was mitzvot performed outside the Beit Hamikdash or mitzvot performed in the Beit Hamikdash. Rabbi Yoel Sirkis otherwise known as the Bach explains why the Jews lost the opportunity to perform Mitzvot. He points out that the Jews of that time were lax in the performance of the Avoda, the service in the Beit Hamikdash. We can speculate that just like they were lax in the performance of the Avoda, they were probably also lax in the regular

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service outside the Beit Hamikdash. For this reason they were punished and lost the privilege to learn Torah, do mitzvot and perform the Avoda in the Beit Hamikdash.

When the Jews reacted and stood up against the Greeks they also made a decision to strengthen their commitment to Mitzvot and to do the Avoda in the best way possible. The Beis Halevi points out that when the Chasmonaim found the pitcher of oil that had enough oil for one night they decided to use thick wicks. They could have used thin wicks which might have lasted eight days, but they wanted to fulfill the mitzva in the most beautiful way with thick wicks and thick flames. We can suggest that they used thick wicks because it was necessary at that time to impress upon the Jewish nation the importance of striving for perfection in doing the Avoda.

In truth the Greeks tried to stop us from doing all mitzvot and learning as we say in the Al Hanisim, and after the nes Chanukah the Jews were able to return to the normal way of serving Hashem. However, they learned an important lesson; not just to serve Hashem but to do so in the best

possible way.

This could be the message of the Gemara in Mesechet Shabbat. What was the real miracle of Chanukah? It was not just that we could go back to keep mitzvot, but that we would perform the Mitzvot and Avoda in the best possible way. In those times that could be done only in the Beit Hamikdash. The Miracle of the oil symbolized that the Jewish nation would strive to serve Hashem in the best possible way.

This year as we light the Chanukiya, say Hallel and Al Hanisim, we should have Hakarat Hatov and celebrate the privilege of being able to do Mitzvot. Let us not forget the commitment the Jews made at the time of Chanukah to serve Hashem in the best way possible. Unfortunately, because we do not have a Beit Hamikdash, our celebration is not complete. As we light the Chanukiya, we should daven for the Beit Hamikdash which will enable us to serve Hashem in the ultimate way. As we say daily in the song of Maoz Tzur:” תְּבוֹנָה בְּיַת תְּפִילָתִי, וְשֵׁם תְּהֵאָה הַזֶּה Restored my House of Prayer and there we will bring a thanksgiving offering.” ■

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