

# Mikeitz-Chanukah 5780

BS"D Parashat Mikeitz-Chanukah 5780

Rabbi Nachman Kahana

Excerpt from my forthcoming book "Reflections From Yerushalayim"

## PUBLICIZING HASHEM'S MIRACLES

Pirsumei nisa, our duty to propagate HaShem's miracles, constitutes a major element in many mitzvot. When reading the Megillat Esther, we publicly proclaim that HaShem saved us from Haman and Achashverosh. At the Pesach Seder, we lean in comfort as we consume our matzah and drink wine to proclaim that we were freed through HaShem's great miracles in Egypt. Yet there is no mitzvah in which pirsumei nisa is as emphasized as it is at Chanukah.

With other mitzvot, our Sages established the obligation of pirsumei nisa on a single level, whereas regarding the Chanukah candles, they established three levels:

- The most rudimentary one involves the head of the household lighting a single candle in his home each night.
- The mehadrin level, for those who want to do more, involves every member of the household lighting one candle each night.
- The mehadrin min hamehadrin level, for those who wish to do the maximum to publicize HaShem's miracles, involves each participant lighting an additional candle each night, starting from one on the first night, leading up to eight candles on the eighth night.

Why did our Sages see fit to emphasize *pirsumei nisa* precisely regarding Chanukah?

I suggest:

The miracle of the flask of oil occurred in a place where only the Kohanim had access – in the Kodesh, the area in front of the Kodesh Kodashim or Holy of Holies. The point was to signal to the Kohanim who initiated and led the war against Hellenism that, despite the painful sacrifices the Jewish people had suffered, HaShem viewed the Maccabees' rebellion favorably.

A year later, the nation's spiritual leaders ordained the observance of Chanukah, requiring every Jewish man and woman to declare fealty to the national/religious effort to banish Greece from the Land of Israel and to restore the Torah to its former glory. A single level of publicizing HaShem's miracles would not have sufficed to express the greatness of that moment when HaShem informed the people that He (and not an angel) stood behind the holy priests. What was required was precisely on the level of *mehadrin*, or even *mehadrin min hamehadrin*, in order adequately to express the depths of our gratitude for the grandeur of the miracle.

## **BROTHERHOOD AND CHANUKAH**

The most eloquent, articulate speaker could not describe the depth of Yosef's emotions as his jeering brothers lowered him into a pit swarming with snakes and scorpions, or the helplessness he felt during his years in the Egyptian dungeon, or the suffering of his father during the years he believed that Yosef was no longer among the living.

By the same token, no one could describe the profound despair felt by Yehudah Maccabee and his soldiers when they observed from their mountain perch the thousands of Greek soldiers

moving forward in phalanx formation – each phalanx made up of 256 soldiers arranged in a 16 by 16 quad, every soldier wielding a spear 7 meters long – all of them marching together as one entity.

A senior officer in the IDF told me that, in his youth, he studied at the military's Command and Staff College. There, the instructor drew on the blackboard a formation of two armies at the onset of battle. He repeated the exercise three times, each time with different data but, in any event, it was clear that one side was stronger than the other. The results of the battles were a foregone conclusion to all the officers present. After everyone agreed that the stronger side would win, the instructor divulged that his sketches depicted the three fateful battles of the "weak" Maccabees against the "strong" Greeks and, in all three, the Maccabees won. The instructor, who was not a Torah observant man, raised his hands and cried out, "Without God, the Jews could never have won!"

To the same extent, we must conclude that, if not for Divine Providence, Yosef would never have emerged from the pit alive, and if not for Divine Providence, the Jewish people would long ago have been pushed off the stage of history together with all the other ancient nations. If not for Divine Providence, the State of Israel would never have arisen, neither would it have survived so many attacks by mightier nations.

Yet how many Jews in the galut acknowledge this fact?!

Were there a halachic body possessing the requisite authority, I would recommend passing an ordinance forbidding the celebration of Chanukah in the Diaspora. Why? Because in the awareness of galut Jews the miracle of Chanukah is nothing but stories from the past with no bearing on reality. And one who denies the miracles taking place before his very eyes certainly does not believe in the miracles that were supposed to have occurred to our people thousands of years ago! So why

observe Chanukah at all?

Unlike the Jews of the Diaspora, the people who dwell in Zion today have a sense of common nationhood. The Jews of the Diaspora don't share Israel's problems or dangers. Their primary language is different, and they rise for the national anthem of a foreign country, not the HaTikvah which expresses the hopes and aspirations of the Nation of Israel. Neither are they ready to lay down their lives for their brothers and sisters.

I learned a powerful lesson from an Egyptian on the day that the Sinai War broke out in 1956. Together with two other yeshivah students, I was attending New York University night school; at the end of the lecture, a man approached me and my yeshivah colleagues (all of us wearing kippot) and asked, "What do you intend to do about the war?" I answered that there was nothing we could do. He then said that he was an Egyptian exchange student and he was about to return to Egypt to fight for his country against Israel. Indeed, we never saw him again.

That individual deeply influenced me. He was a faithful son of his land and a devoted brother of his people, whereas I was no more than a step-brother to the Jews who were fighting at that moment in the Land of Israel. What shame I felt! Truly a strange person to have for a teacher, but his influence upon me was enormous.

And that brings me to the crux of the matter:

Despite what had been done to him in the past by his brothers, when Yosef saw that Leah's son Yehudah was ready to sacrifice himself for Rachel's son Binyamin, he understood that there had been a turning point in how the brothers related to one another. Going beyond their maternal loyalties and divisions, they were truly brothers now, and it was then that he embraced them.

Similarly, the ability of the Maccabees to enlist Jews who would be willing to sacrifice their lives in an almost hopeless war derived from the sense of brotherhood of the Nation of Israel dwelling in the Land of Israel. This is what moved HaShem to work miracles for them at Chanukah.

This is what we need now.

Shabbat Shalom,

Nachman Kahana

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