

CHANUKAH: The Anatomy of a Miracle

By Rabbi Tzvi Sytner

We are going to discuss the upcoming holiday of Chanukah, its relevance and meaning for us today in our lives. In order to do that we need to explore the topic of miracle, in the Chanukah story and in life.

This learning module poses several questions that keep building till the concluding source. So, make sure to keep reviewing all the questions as you add new ones, so you'll be able to answer them all at the end.

Q: Before learning through the sources, as partners discuss and sum up the story of Chanukah. What would you say is THE main miracle of the story?

SOURCE #1 TALMUD BAVLI:TRACTATE SHABBAT 21B

What is [the rabbinic reason for the Yom Tov of] Chanukah? It is as the rabbi's taught: On the 25th day of [the month of] Kislev the 8 days of Chanukah begin. They are 8 days total in which we are not permitted to eulogize or fast. Because this is when the Syrian-Greeks entered into the Sanctuary, and contaminated all the oil that was in the Sanctuary, and when the royal Hasmoneans gained the upper hand and prevailed, they searched and found only one flask of oil that was lying out of sight with the Kohen Gadol's seal [still] on it. It contained only enough oil to light the menorah for one day. [However] a miracle was performed and they lit the light of the menorah with it for 8 days. In the following year they established these 8 days as festival days with respect to Praise and Giving Thanks.

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

Q: So, according to the Talmud what is the main miracle of Chanukah?

A: It seems to focus on the miracle of the oil.

Q1] So the first question (which we will answer at the end) is: Why is there such a heavy focus on the oil and not on the war?

SOURCE #2: MAIMONIDES, LAWS OF CHANUKAH CH. 4:12

The mitzvah of lighting the menorah is such a precious one, so much so that a person must be really careful to publicize the miracle and increase praise and thanks to the Almighty for the miracles that He did for us.

Even if a person doesn't have food to eat, except for what he gets from charity, he should borrow or sell his shirt to buy oil and candles to light.

יב: מצות נר חנוכה מצוה חביבה היא עד מאד וצריך אדם להזהר בה כדי להודיע הנס ולהוסיף בשבח האל והודיה לו על הנסים שעשה לנו. אפילו אין לו מה יאכל אלא מן הצדקה שואל או מוכר כסותו ולוקח שמן ונרות ומדליק

Take a moment to analyze Maimonides (Rambam) words closely. What seems strange, or interesting? Any questions? Observations?

Again, we see from the Rambam how important the Mitzvah of lighting the menorah is. This would also seem to suggest that the miracle of oil was the main miracle and not the war?

Q2] But why is it SUCH a big deal to light the menorah that a person would have to sell the shirt off his back?! Would someone have to sell his shirt to buy Matzah?

Q3] Also, why is the Rambam stressing that we have to publicize the miracle of lighting menorah?

We don't eat our Matzah in public. Look at the next source to see how far this goes.

SOURCE #3: TALMUD BAVLI, TRACTATE SHABBOS 22A (AND RASHI)

A Chanukah light that one placed above 20 amos (Approx. 35 feet) [from the ground] is invalid...

*[Commentary] Rashi: Because people won't see it above 20 amos, and as a result there's no "Pirumei Nissah", **Publicizing of the Miracle.***

נר של חנוכה שהניחה למעלה מכי אמה פסולה

So again, we see that publicizing the miracle is such a big deal...why!?

Try to find one more thing about the Rambam that is strange. Analyze the Rambam one more time and perhaps you'll notice a very subtle inconsistency.

Q4] The fourth question is why does Rambam say be careful to publicize the "miracle" in order to increase praise for the "miracles" (singular to plural)?

Switching gears for a second, let's discuss who lights the menorah in the home?

In Jewish law there are actually several customs. In some homes husbands and wives light, and in some homes, they join together in their husband's lighting.

But one law that's universal is the following:

SOURCE #4: LAWS OF CHANUKAH: SHULCHAN ARUCH S.670:1

And women have the custom not to do any work while the candles are lit. (Since the war was won specially through women...Yehudis sedated a Greek general and killed him). (Mishna Brurah)

ונוהגות הנשים שלא לעשות מלאכה בעוד שהנרות דולקות

Q5] Why do women have to chill out while the candles are burning? (what does winning a war have to do with burning of the oil?)

Before we answer all of our questions let's tackle arguably the most famous question that exists regarding Chanukah -

How many days is Chanukah?

And why is it 8 days?

How much oil did they actually have? For how many days?

Q6] So if they actually had enough oil for one full day, and the oil burned for 8, then the miracle only occurred for 7 days!? So why celebrate Chanukah as an 8-day miracle if there were only really 7 days of miracles??

Let's all take a look at that question in its original source...

SOURCE #5: LAWS OF CHANUKAH: BAIS YOSEF S.670

And one might ask: why did they establish Chanukah for 8 days? If there was enough oil to burn for one night, then that means that the miracle was only for 7 nights?

ואיכה למידק למה קבעו ח' ימים דכיון דשמן שבפךהיה בו כדי להדליק לילה אחד נמצא שלא נעשה הנס אלא בז' הלילות?

INTRO TO ANSWERS:

Discuss with your chavrusa the following question:

What's the difference between nature & miracles?

The main difference between nature and miracles is frequency. For example, if large balls of hail filled with fire fell from the sky would we call that a miracle? Of course!

If lightning rods come from the sky would we call that a miracle? Probably not. But, what's the difference? The only real difference is that one we are used to, and one we are not used to.

Here's another example: If someone jumps off a 100-story building and lives would we call that a miracle? yes. But what if from now on, people stop using elevators because everyone can jump off buildings and survive, would our kids call that a miracle? (No..It becomes the "new normal and we call it nature).

When new "miracles" that defy nature happen in our lives, it really catches our attention...but the reality is that even the more "natural" parts of our lives are miraculous...it just takes much more introspection and attention to notice them.

The real miracle of Chanukah is winning the war, so why do we focus so heavily on the oil? Because if we solely focused on the war year after year...we would call it nature. But once we get our minds into thinking "miracles" we can then introspect and realize even the war was a miracle.

Now, with this idea in mind, try to go back to every one of our questions and see how you can answer each one:

- 1) Why there's such a heavy focus on the oil and not on the war?
- 2) Why lighting candles is so important that you'd sell shirt? (don't have to for shofar)
- 3) Why is it so important to publicize the miracle? (don't have to for matzah)
- 4) Why does the Rambam switch from "miracle" to "miracles"?
- 5) Why do women have to chill during lighting just because we won the war because of them?
- 6) Why is Chanukah 8 days if the miracle was only 7?

Take a stab at coming up with the answers based upon your understanding of the sources.

Here are the answers:

Both the wining of the war, and the burning of the oil are equally miraculous. However, oil which should last for one day and lasting eight is more obvious to us...

A1] that's why we have such a focus on the oil and not the war

A2] and that's why we go so far as to say sell our shirts to buy oil, so that we can learn this crucial lesson of "seeing the miracles in our lives".

A4] that's also why Rambam says focus on the miracle of the oil to see the miracles (war, and everything else miraculous) in our lives.

A5] That's why women don't work during the lighting, because they were so heavily involved with the war. We want them to "see past" that by focusing only on the Chanukah Lights and its broader lesson.

A6] That's why Chanukah is 8 days even though we had enough oil for 1 day, because even the fact that oil can burn at all is a miracle! (just like burning oil is a miracle so is winning an unwinnable war)

A3] And that's why there's such an emphasis to publicize, because we want everyone to see that G-d does miracles for all of us every day, in every aspect of our lives!

In fact, the essence of a Jew is to always be thankful, and to always see the miracles in our lives.

See the next source. The context is that Jacob had 4 wives, each of whom was a prophetess, and knew that Jacob would be having 12 sons (tribes). Therefore, they assumed if there would be 12 sons and 4 wives, then it must be that each of them would have 3 children.

SOURCE #6: GENESIS 29:35

And she conceived again and bore a son, and she said, "This time, I will thank the Lord! Therefore, she named him Judah, and [then] she stopped bearing.

Rashi: This time, I will thank: since I have taken more than my share. Consequently, I must offer up thanks. – [from Gen. Rabbah 71:4]

וְתַהַר עוֹד וְתֵלֵד בֶּן וְתֹאמַר הַפְּעַם אוֹדָה אֶת ה' עַל כֵּן קָרָאָה שְׁמוֹ יְהוּדָה וְתִעַמַּד מִלְּדוֹת:
רש"י: הַפְּעַם אוֹדָה: שֶׁנִּטְלַתִּי יוֹתֵר מִחֻלְקִי, מֵעַתָּה יֵשׁ לִי לַיהוּדוֹת:

Once Leah has her 4th she says “I will thank G-d now, and call him Judah [thanks]”

The Jewish people are called Yehudi from Yehuda, meaning thankful, stemming from the idea that we must realize everything we have in life is really extra, miraculous, and we have to be thankful for it all.

Chanukah is about looking at the candles and introspecting on how blessed we really are in our lives in every respect, even our challenges, and living more thankful lives!

Extra Credit: Why did Leah wait till her 4th son to give thanks to G-d? What does this teach us with respect to gratitude?