Chanuka: Restoration and Innovation

Based on a *sicha* by Harav Aharon Lichtenstein

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We tend to perceive the miracle of Chanuka as the restoration of past glory: the success of the Jewish nation in surviving – both physically and spiritually; in preserving its character, and in maintaining its values and its tradition.

This perception is well grounded in one of the central motifs in *Chazal’s* understanding of the events of Chanuka: the motif of purity. Thus, for example, the whole story of the single cruse of oil centers around the concepts of impurity and purity, and in the “*al ha-nissim*” addition to the *Amida* prayer and to *Birkat Ha-mazon*, we similarly emphasize that the Hasmoneans “purified Your Temple.”

The concept of “purity” (as opposed to the concept of “holiness” – see Ra’avad’s “*Sha’ar Ha-Kedusha*”) is primarily a negative one: it is the absence of impurity. The miracle of Chanuka follows the same model: it consists essentially of destroying impurity, removing the idol from the Temple, and restoring Israel to its original state and status.

In this sense, Chanuka may be viewed as a festival with a conservative message – whether the physical rehabilitation of the Temple, or the spiritual restoration the nation’s religious situation.

However, closer examination of the name “Chanuka” and its root (*ch-n-k*) reveal that its essence is exactly the opposite: it represents not a return or restoration of a previous state, but rather the creation of a new framework and its implementation. For example, among those who are exempt from serving in the army to wage war, the Torah lists “the man who has built a new house but has not yet consecrated it (*ve-lo chanakho*)” (*Devarim* 20:5) – i.e., he has not yet begun to live in it (as Rashi explains – “*chinukh* is an expression of beginning”). The same idea is to be found in the sacrifices offered by the princes of the tribes. When the *Mishkan* is established, ushering in a new stage and direction in the relationship between God and Israel, the sacrifices of the princes are referred to as the “*chanukat ha-mizbeach*” (consecration of the altar) (*Bamidbar* 7:84). *Chazal* use the term in a similar way when they refer to the sacrifice offered by a *kohen* when he commences his term of service as a “*minchat chinukh*” (offering of consecration).

This note of newness and renewal, as arising from the etymology of the name “Chanuka,” goes deeper. An example is to be found in Ramban’s answer (at the beginning of *parashat Beha’alotekha*) to *Chazal’s* famous question: “Why is the *parasha* about the menora situated immediately after the consecration of the princes?” He writes:

However, the intention of this narrative is to point to an allusion from this *parasha* to the consecration by lights which took place in the Second Temple through Aharon and his sons – meaning, the Hasmonean, the Kohen Gadol, and his sons. I have found reference to this (allusion) in Megillat Setarim, by Rabbeinu Nissim, who mentions this legend and says: “I have seen in the Midrash… The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moshe: ‘Speak to Aharon and say to him’ – There will be another *chanuka* (consecration), with the kindling of lights, where I shall bring about for Israel, through your sons, miracles and deliverance and a *chanuka* that will be named after you – and that is the Chanuka of the Hasmoneans.”

And it is for this reason that this *parasha* (Aharon’s kindling of the menora) appears immediately after the consecration of the altar (through the sacrifices of the princes).

Ramban highlights the parallel between the second Chanuka and the first. This tells us that something of the character of the original consecration (as described in the Torah) is also manifest in the second consecration (Chanuka - at the time of the Second Temple). In other words, just as the consecration of the *Mishkan* was a “Chanuka” of inauguration, of newness, so the re-dedication by the Hasmoneans likewise includes a note of newness and of new light.

To illustrate the two aspects that we have discussed, let us examine a similar event from another festival instituted by the Sages – Purim. Once the terrible threat of annihilation had passed, the Jewish nation seemingly returned to its original situation. However, here too *Chazal* detect a deeper message in what had happened. As the Gemara teaches (*Shabbat* 88a):

“And they stood at the foot of the mountain” (*Shemot* 19:17)… This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, held the mountain over them like a cask and said to them: If you accept the Torah, well and good; if not, there you will die. Rabbi Acha bar Yaakov said: This represents a great defense as to the Torah (Rashi: that if God would summon them to judgment – “Why have you not observed that which you took upon yourselves?” – they would be able to answer that they accepted it under duress). Rabba said: Nevertheless, the generation in the days of Achashverosh accepted it anew (Rashi: out of love, in light of the miracle that had been performed for them), as it is written, “They Jews upheld and accepted” (*Esther* 9:27) – they upheld that which they had previously accepted.

In the miracle of Purim, *Chazal* detected a re-acceptance of the Torah, with a new dimension of commitment and of self-definition as servants of God. Their acceptance was no longer a coerced, but rather an acceptance of Torah out of absolutely free choice, with new resolve, and with a new dimension of fear of Heaven. This was no longer a “great defense” or “great excuse” concerning the Torah, but rather “the generation accepted it in the days of Achashverosh”: out of love and spiritual empowerment.

The reestablishment of routine that seems to be reflected in the conclusion of the Megilla – “King Achasheverosh placed a tax upon the land and the islands of the sea” (*Esther* 10:1) – speaks only of Achashverosh’s administration; *Kenesset Yisrael*, meanwhile, have “upheld and accepted” the covenant. The dubious religious standards evident at the beginning of the Megilla have disappeared. *Am Yisrael* has undergone a voluntary awakening and strengthening, with a renewed and fresh connection to God, a new perspective and a clear vision the likes of which were unknown to them prior to their encounter with the terrible danger which has now passed.

What happened on Purim on the physical level, happened on Chanuka on the spiritual level. This was not just success in preserving the existing situation, but something more – a new and creative step forward.

This sense of renewal finds expression in three spheres.

First, here too – as in the case of Purim – the experience of facing existential danger left its mark. The possibility of spiritual conquest and destruction brought the Jewish nation to greater depth and intensity in their observance of Torah, lending their Divine service a spirit of renewal and freshness.

However, there was more than an expansion and deepening of what already existed. There was also a real addition and innovation in the sphere of rabbinically-ordained commandments. While the existential foundation of praise and thanks to God certainly does exist within the Written Law, *Chazal* created their own new entity on Chanuka: a new commandment, with all of the attending details and specifications.

This in itself entails two innovations. One is the actual phenomenon of the creation of a rabbinically-ordained positive commandment; the other is the reinforcement and emphasis of the authority of *Chazal* in general – representing the basis for other festivals and other commandments. It is apparently no coincidence that the subject of Chanuka candles is where we find the Talmudic wrestling with the idea of reciting the words “and He has commanded us” in the “*she-hechiyanu*” blessing with regard to commandments ordained not by the Torah but by the rabbis:

Where did He command us [concerning such commandments]?... From [the words], “You shall not turn” [from the sages’ commands] (*Devarim* 17:11)! (*Shabbat* 23a)

This aspect of innovation, with respect to rabbinically-ordained commandments, bears significance that transcends by far both the actual introduction of a new commandment and the reinforcement of rabbinical authority. This represents a new dimension to the system of commandments as a whole.

This new dimension finds expression in Chanuka in a third sphere. The Rambam, at the beginning of his Laws of Chanuka (chapter 3), writes:

…Until the God of our fathers had compassion for them and delivered them from the hands [of the Greek kings], and saved them. And the Hasmoneans, the High Priests, grew mighty and they killed them, and they delivered Israel from their hands, and established a king from among the *kohanim*, and the Israelite monarchy was restored for more than two hundred years, until the destruction of the Second Temple.

The Rambam views one of the achievements of Chanuka as being manifest on the political level. His formulation implies that prior to the Hasmonean victory the Israelite monarchy was practically non-existent, and that at that time *Am Yisrael* received a boost to their political independence.

Thus, the miracle of Chanuka catalyzed a most significant growth spurt, on an unprecedented scale, within Judaism – in terms of development of the Oral Law, in terms of rabbinic exegesis, and in term of legislation. In this sense, what we publicize on Chanuka is not just the miracle that happened, but also the far-reaching growth that it brought in its wake.

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