YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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UNDERSTANDING AGGADA

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Shiur #07: The Miracle of Chanuka

What is Chanuka? The Rabbi taught: On the twenty fifth of Kislev, there are the eight days of Chanuka, during which we do not eulogize nor fast. When the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oil in the Temple. When the Hasmonean monarchy became strong and overcame them, they searched and could find only one jar of oil stamped with the seal of the *kohen gadol*. This jar contained only enough oil to last for one night, but a miracle happened and it lit for eight days. The next year, they established these days as holidays for praise and thanksgiving. (*Shabbat* 21b)

One of the many famous questions asked on this gemara is why it emphasizes the miracle of the oil rather than the military victory. After all, many miracles happened in *Tanakh* without anyone feeling a need to establish a holiday in commemoration of them. We would imagine that only an event that changes the historical course of the Jewish people, such as the Hasmoneans throwing off the yoke of the Greek-Syrians, should engender a holiday. The text of the *Al Hanissim* prayer that we recite on Chanuka compounds this perplexity, as that prayer stresses only the military victory, and does not even explicitly mention the miracle of the oil. Are we celebrating the salvation or the miracle of the oil?

R. Yehuda Loewe of Prague (Maharal) suggests one answer in his *Chiddushei* *Aggadot.* Maharal agrees that the military victory and the subsequent reclaiming of Jewish independence were the true reasons for the holiday. Yet any military victory, even one against overwhelming odds, can be explained according to the regular processes of the natural order. Indeed, the English victory over the much bigger French army at Agincourt in 1415 is not viewed this as a special act of Divine providence. A similar claim might be made about the Hasmonean victory. The miracle of the oil comes to clarify God's role in the entire story. Even though we are celebrating the victory, the gemara focuses our attention on a miracle so that we recall who orchestrated that victory from above.

R. Meir Simcha Hacohen of Dvinsk suggests a different answer in his *Meshekh* *Chokhma* (*Shemot* 12:16). According to R. Meir Simcha, Judaism shies away from celebrating military triumphs, lest the Jews focus their joy on the suffering of their enemies, which is an improper cause for celebration. This theme reverberates throughout many of our holidays. We celebrate Purim on the day that we rested from our enemies, rather than on the day of the military triumph itself. Though the death of our enemies is regrettable, the security, independence, and religious growth that follow in the wake of the victory are indeed worth celebrating. In the same way, the talmudic account of the Chanuka story shifts our attention from the battlefield to the Temple. Additionally, the Torah sanctified the seventh day of Pesach prior to the drowning of the Egyptians on that very day, so that we would think of that day as sanctified in its own right and not as an expression of our celebrating the death of the Egyptians.

Thus, the emphasis on the oil either reminds us of God's hand in history, or encourages us to celebrate positive results that emerge from a military victory rather than the death of the enemy. Although both answers are quite important, the Maharal's approach helps us explain a later part of the same talmudic page. A different comment of R. Meir Simcha will also contribute to the analysis.

Rav Kahana said that Rav Natan bar Minyomi taught in the name of Rabbi Tanchum: A Chanuka light that is placed higher than twenty *amot* is invalid, like a *sukka* and a cross-beam [over the entrance to an] alley (a case having to do with the laws of *eruvin*).

Rav Kahane said that Rav Natan bar Minyomi taught in the name of Rabbi Tanchum: What is meant by the verse "and the pit was empty; it contained no water" (*Bereishit* 37:24)? Once it says that the pit was empty, don't I know that it did not contain water? Rather, what does the Torah teach me when it says: "it contained no water?" It did not contain water, but it did have snakes and scorpions. (*Shabbat* 21b-22a)

Much ink has been spilled in an attempt to determine what this homily on the Yosef story has to do with Chanuka. It follows a discussion about the proper height of the Chanuka lights, and precedes a statement about which side of the doorway to place those lights. Why interrupt the Chanuka discussion with a seemingly irrelevant piece of *derash*?

A surface-level solution would be that the gemara cites this homily simply because it was authored by the same rabbis as the previous statement - the comments regarding the invalid height and the snakes in the pit both come from R. Kahana quoting R. Natan quoting R. Tanchum. Yet the inquisitive reader cannot help wondering whether a more essential connection exists.

R. Meir Simcha (*Meshekh Chokhma*, *Bereishit* 37:24) offers an explanation that requires a bit of preliminary background. The mishna in *Berakhot* (54a) mentions a blessing to be recited upon seeing a place where God performed a miracle for the Jewish people. The Avudraham states (*Hilkhot Berakhot, Sha'ar* *Ha-shemini*) that this blessing is recited only for a miracle that breaks the boundaries of the natural order. If Divine providence arranges things within the natural order, no blessing is recited (see also *Shulchan Aruch* 218:9 for a debate about this point). We can easily see the logic of the Avudraham's position, as it would be difficult to determine precisely when God works His providence in a miraculous fashion within nature, and we would therefore lack a concrete guideline for when to make this *berakha* if we did not accept his restriction.

The other relevant source is a midrash cited in the name of a Rabbi Tanchuma. According to this midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 100:9), Yosef, on the way back from burying his father, saw the pit his brothers had tossed him into and recited the appropriate blessing for seeing a place where a miracle occurred. (R. Meir Simcha is also utilizing a midrash at the end of *Tanchuma* on *Bereishit*; see the comments of R. Zeev Wolf Einhorn on *Bereishit Rab*ba 100:9 in his *Perush Maharzu*.) R. Meir Simcha points out that being saved from snakes and scorpions is hardly the essence of the Yosef story - the essence is moving from potential death to the position of second-in-command in Egypt. However, he could not make a blessing on his political ascent that occurred without any breaks in nature. Only the pit where he had miraculously survived the company of snakes and scorpions enabled him to recite the *berakha*.

We can now understand the juxtaposition of the Chanuka gemara with the Yosef story. The Chanuka story is about escaping the religious persecution of Antiochus and restoring both Jewish sovereignty and religious freedom. Yet this would not call for a *berakha* were it not for the supernatural miracle of the small cruse of oil lasting for eight days. In both instances, the breaking of the laws of nature, be it surviving the snakes or extending the burning power of oil, are not ends in themselves. Rather, they indicate that the broader context of these events reflect the hand of God working within history. We truly bless God for allowing Yosef and the Hasmoneans to achieve the power necessary to better the situation of the Jewish people. The miracles' purpose is to allow us to certify that it was the hand of God that brought about these achievements.

Of course, it does not escape R. Meir Simcha's notice that the gemara in Shabbat cites R. Tanchum and the midrash in *Bereishit Rabba* is in the name of Tanchuma. He states that these two names belong to one and the same person. Tanchum/Tanchuma taught us about the blessing Yosef made as part of his teaching us about the deeper relationship between Yosef and Chanuka.