YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**SPECIAL CHANUKA PACKAGE 5776**

The Jar of Oil and the Future of the Jewish People

Based on a *sicha* by Rav Ezra Bick

Translated by Kaeren Fish

The Rambam introduces the laws of Chanuka with a description of the historical victory:

“During the Second Temple Period, the Greek rulers issued decrees against the Jews, [attempting to] nullify their faith and not allowing them to observe the Torah and the commandments. They put their hands to their property and their daughters, and they entered the Sanctuary, wreaked havoc and defiled the holy vessels. The Jews suffered greatly because of them, for they oppressed them greatly until the God of our fathers had mercy on them and delivered them from their hand and saved them. The sons of the Chashmonaim, the *Kohanim Gedolim*, prevailed and they killed them and delivered the Jews from their hand, and appointed a king from among the *kohanim*, and Jewish sovereignty was restored for more than two hundred years, until the destruction of the Second Temple.” (*Hilkhot Megilla ve-Chanuka* 3:1)

Here the emphasis is on the historical victory. However, the Rambam then immediately continues:

“When the Jews overcame their enemies and destroyed them, on the twenty-fifth of the month of Kislev they entered the Sanctuary and found no oil in the Temple that was ritually pure, except for a single jar that contained only enough to burn for one day. They lit the arrangement of lamps from it for eight days, until they [were able to] crush olives and produce [more] pure oil.” (3:2)

The Rambam therefore rules:

“And therefore the Sages of that generation ordained that these eight days, starting from the night of the twenty-fifth of Kislev, should be days of joy and praise [to God]. Candles are lit in the evenings at the entrances to the houses on each of those eight nights to display and publicize the miracle. And these days are known as Chanuka, and it is forbidden to eulogize and fast on them, as on Purim. And the lighting of candles on them is a rabbinic command, like the reading of the Megilla.”

What is referred to by the opening words here, “And therefore…”? Obviously, what came previously – i.e., *halakha* 2, because only there do we find reference to a specific date. (War, by nature, does not have a specific date.)

However, there is more to it than that. In *Megillat Ta’anit*, there is a list of dates when fasting is prohibited; these were festive days during the time of the Second Temple, commemorating various minor victories. Why is it that the entire list in *Megillat Ta’anit* is no longer observed – except for Chanuka and Purim? Seemingly, after the Destruction of the Temple, the minor events no longer have any relevance, and it is for this reason that the Rambam emphasizes, “And therefore…,” because Chanuka is still relevant, even after the Destruction.

Jews are forbidden from fasting on a festival, but if the day is no longer considered a festival then clearly fasting is permitted. The 25th of Kislev marks the finding of the single jar of pure oil that remained after the “defiling of the sacraments.” The restoring of purity is relevant even after the Destruction, and therefore the Rambam concludes that Chanuka does not fall away as do the other dates mentioned in *Megillat Ta’anit*.

What did the “Sages of that generation” understand? From the perspective of future generations, how could they be sure that the festival would be accepted favorably by God? First, they may have viewed as a sign the fact that the same day that the Chashmonaim entered the Temple in order to purify it, God led them miraculously to a single jar of pure oil. This speaks to the immediate and historical level. Second, we must understand the significance of this sign. The finding of that small jar that ended up burning for eight days signified, for the Sages, the Divine stamp of approval on their victory. A lighting for just one day parallels the Jewish sovereignty that was restored for more than two hundred years, but if that one day could be extended, by God’s intervention and approval, to more days, then the festival is relevant for a longer time. Even if the popular perception of the miracle was nullified with the Destruction, Chanuka involves something deeper, which is relevant for the future, too.

This explains how God gave the Sages a sign in the form of the jar of oil – through the very fact that it was found at all, and in the fact that it burned for eight days – that Chanuka is relevant for all future generations. However, we must understand the meaning with which the festival is imbued. The Rambam writes, “to display and publicize the miracle,” and then goes on to connect Chanuka with Purim, which is the subject of the first two chapters: “And these days are known as Chanuka, and it is forbidden to eulogize and fast on them, like on Purim. And the lighting of candles on them [i.e., those eight days] is a rabbinic command, like the reading of the Megilla.”

Our lighting, too, is a sign, just as is the Megilla; and just as the reading of the Megilla has content, so the lighting of the Chanuka candles has content which we must understand. What is this “publicizing of the miracle”? After all, God’s power finds expression in the other festivals, too; what greater miracle can we imagine than the Exodus from Egypt, or the splitting of the Red Sea?

It seems, however, that Hellenism was a wave that swept over the world and nothing could stand in its way. The modern way of thinking and the modern approach have Greek philosophy as one of their main foundations. The very fact that it was (almost) impossible to find a jar of pure oil testifies to the domination of Greek rule and culture.

The oil lasts for eight days, which is exactly how long it takes to prepare more oil so as to create a continuity of purity. Through the finding of the jar of oil, God promises us that there will always remain a remnant of purity, no matter how many waves of new cultures and civilizations wash over the world. The tiny spark that is assured for us will always continue to ensure Jewish eternity.

Sometimes we have trouble seeing beyond the “normalcy” of the two hundred years when Jewish sovereignty was restored. In the past, some Jews were certain that Judaism would not survive the wave of the Enlightenment and modernity, and they invested great effort in preserving an isolated “Jewish shtetl.” But even today, do we really believe that the historical processes that seem so entrenched and permanent, might be overturned? On the level of family and community our situation may be good, but do we believe that *Am Yisrael* as a whole can be transformed into a chariot for the Divine Presence and sanctify God’s Name in the world?

We are more optimistic than our predecessors were, but this is expressed only in greater confidence with regard to ourselves. What about the rest of *Am Yisrael*? Many Jews become caught up in the pessimism of Hellenists, maintaining that *Am Yisrael* will not rise up again. The message of the jar of oil is that a great flame can be kindled by a small spark; “And the House of Yaakov will be a fire, and the House of Yosef a torch” (*Ovadia* 1:18).

What is the success of the Chashmonaim? The continuity of the Second Temple, although it was on the brink of ruin from within. *Chazal* want to tell us that this dimension, too, exists today. A tiny bit of foundation, a small jar, can be the start of an entire edifice. The Second Temple was not completely destroyed; all we need to do is to build.

The first Chanuka that I spent at yeshiva, I had just gotten off the plane, and Rav Lichtenstein got me to deliver a *devar Torah* at the yeshiva’s Chanuka celebration. This is what I said then, too: the tiny spark within every Jew can become a great fire. We must focus not only on our own religiosity, but on the ability of the entire Jewish people to become a great blaze. It seems impossible, but it is actually possible, because all it takes is a single jar of oil.

It is very important that we know and believe, with regard to every Jew we see – and not just with regard to ourselves – that he or she is meant to be part of the great fire that *Am Yisrael* will create together. It seems unrealistic, but that is exactly the message that God conveys to us via the oil burning continuously for eight days: God will ensure that there will be a connection between the tiny spark, the tiny beginning that it is up to us to find, and the work of building it up into a huge blaze. We need to believe in that spark and to work to raise up that fire, with God’s help.