

THE PATH TO FOLLOW



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THE MIRACLE OF CHANUKAH: AN ENCOURAGEMENT FOR ALL THE GENERATIONS (FROM RABBI DAVID PINTO SHLITA)

With the miracle of Chanukah, the laws of nature were transcended, for oil that could burn for only one day burned for eight. This alludes to each of us, for the word shemen (oil) is formed by the same letters as the word neshama (soul), teaching us that a person's soul can rise above the laws of nature to sanctify and purify itself. However, we must not forget that there also exists an influence exerted by our enemies, these being the evil inclination and its partners.

In addition, every Jew should be like oil, which floats to the surface when mixed with other liquids. Similarly, it is possible to live next to non-Jews without mixing with them. The story of the Emperor of Rome and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hanania (Tanhuma Toldot 5) evokes this very same idea. The Emperor had seen a lamb among 70 wolves, and he asked Rabbi Yehoshua how it had managed to survive. He replied, "The Children of Israel are in the same situation. They are like a lamb among 70 wolves, these being the nations of the world, yet in spite of that they survive because their Shepherd, the Holy One, blessed be He, protects them from on high."

We shall explain certain aspects of this story concerning the Emperor of Rome and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hanania. Actually, we must first understand the Emperor's question. Why was he surprised that the Romans had not killed the Jews that lived about them? The Romans had thousands of prisoners, slaves and servants in all countries that did them no harm, so why attack

the Jews in particular, since they were not at war with them? Rabbi Yehoshua's reply is not clear either. Furthermore, it is difficult to understand why the Emperor did not ask Rabbi Yehoshua where the lamb's Shepherd was, especially when the second Temple was destroyed!

The answer is that the parable surely refers to a Jew in particular, one who observes Torah and mitzvot in the midst of thousands of wicked Romans who are plunged in immorality. That is why the Emperor was surprised. How could it be that a Jew is not influenced by the behavior of non-Jews? Very much to the contrary, even when they scorn him, mocking his peyot and his head covering, he does not insult in return, exemplifying the description of one who "receives insults without returning them" (Shabbat 88b).

Even more, we know that when someone finds himself under the control of an invading force, he tends to mimic the invader's customs, for he is under his control. Furthermore, when a person is in exile, he does not want to live as a slave, but rather as a free man, hence he adopts the customs of the land where he is exiled. Yet here, the Children of Israel, though they were under the domination of the Romans, observed mitzvot without adopting Roman customs.

This is exactly what Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hanania replied, namely that the Children of Israel are above the laws of nature, for there is someone protecting them – their Shepherd on high – but only when they observe Torah and mitzvot. This

Continuation page 2

is because, as the Sages have said, “When the voice of Jacob is heard in synagogues and houses of study, the hand of Esau is powerless” (Bereshith Rabba 65:16). However if they do not observe Torah and mitzvot, G-d hides His face from them, such as when the second Temple was destroyed because “they have forsaken My Torah” (Jeremiah 9:12). In such a case, nothing prevents them from mixing with non-Jews.

We learn from this that when a Jew studies Torah and observes mitzvot, nobody has power over him, and his soul burns with the fire of Torah (which is called fire – Midrash Shochar Tov 17:7), like oil that is related to light and fire, and on which nobody has power over. This is what a Jew’s soul is like, for in Torah study it can be said that he advances “from strength to strength” (Psalms 84:8). All this is because a Jew’s Shepherd – the Holy One, blessed be He – protects him from on high, as it is written: “G-d, Who shepherds me” (Genesis 48:15).

Today as well, we find the very same thing. Thousands of Bnei Torah study day and night in yeshivot without missing their families, like Rabbi Akiva, who left to study Torah for 12 years, and then for 12 years more, without even going home (Ketubot 63a). Similarly, after a 25 year absence the Vilna Gaon Zatzal came home and saw his sister, said hello, and then went right back to studying. When we study like this, we are not disturbed by the vanities of this world, for the soul burns with Torah.

We should also note one more thing. Today we see Talmidei Chachamim who are indifferent to the vanities of this world, who neglect all pleasures, and who are in synagogue and houses of study night and day (Peah 1:1). This is something unknown among other peoples, and this is due to the Torah. In effect, the Torah protects and saves them from all harm (Sotah 21a), and it continues to protect them in this world and in the World to Come (Perkei Avoth 6:9), as it is said: “As you go forth, it will guide you; as you recline, it will guard you; and when you awake, it will converse with you” (Proverbs 6:22). All the vitality in this world and the World to Come occurs only through the

power of Torah, and the soul is nourished from the holiness drawn from under the Throne of Glory. As the holy books say, man has two guardians: The Holy One, blessed be He, and the Torah.

However when a Jew stops studying Torah (which is called fire), the fire goes out by itself. In such a case the oil (which alludes to the soul) no longer serves any purpose, and it is then that a Jew risks being influenced by all the vanities of this world. That was Rabbi Yehoshua’s response: The main thing is the power of Torah. This is also the subject of Chanukah – the light of the Torah – as the Gemara states: “Our Sages teach, ‘What is Chanukah? It is the study of Torah’ ” (Shabbat 21a). In fact, without this study of Torah, the evil inclination (which is also called fire – Zohar I:80a) risks making a man transgress, and this to the point that he can forget G-d, as it is said: “If you abandon me for one day, I will abandon you for two” (Yerushalmi, end of Berachot), to the extent that he will forget all that he has studied.

What’s more is that all this is alluded to in the verse that states, “If you follow My decrees and observe My commandments and perform them” (Leviticus 26:3). On this verse, Rashi writes in the name of the Midrash (Torat Kohanim ad loc.) that it refers to diligent Torah study. This means that in every circumstance, if we put effort into studying Torah, we will then observe mitzvot. For that matter, we cannot observe mitzvot without diligent Torah study. In the reverse situation, a man betrays the Holy One, blessed be He, for the word ma’al (betrayal) is composed of the same letters as the word amal (labor, i.e., laborious study).

When a man studies Torah, G-d helps him to the point of transcending nature, which is what actually happened during Chanukah. Even though there was only enough oil for one day, a miracle occurred and the oil burned for eight days, for the light of Torah shines even outside the normal bounds of nature, yet all this happens only when a man puts effort into Torah study. And as our Sages have taught, that is Chanukah.

IN MEMORY OF THE TZADDIKIM

RABBI YEchezkel LANDAU, AUTHOR OF NODA B'YEHUDA

Rabbi Yechezkel Landau, the Rav of Prague, was known by the name of his book Noda B'Yehuda. During his time he was the source par excellence to whom people turned for practical advice, and even until today his name shines like a star in the firmament of Judaism.

The son of Rabbi Yehuda Levi, Rabbi Yechezkel Landau was born on Heshvan 18, 5474 (1713) in Opatow, Poland. Up to the age of 13, he studied Torah with Rabbi Yitzchak Halevi of Ludmir, as well as with the Rav of the city, Rabbi Moshe Yaakov of Krakow, who greatly liked this young boy with a sharp mind. Together they discussed difficult problems posed by the Gemara.

At the age of 14, he went to the town of Brody and there he studied with very devoted young men. At the age of 18, he married a girl by the name Liebe, the daughter of Rabbi Yaakovka of Dubno, and went to live with his father-in-law there. Yet after a short time, he persuaded his father-in-law to come live in Brody, which was then a town filled with sages and scholars. There he was welcomed as one of the "Sages of Kloiz," a famous Beit Midrash that included great Torah scholars.

In 5506 (1745), Rabbi Yechezkel became the Rav of Jampol. He stayed there for six years, and then he was called upon to be the Rav of Prague. There he directed a great yeshiva that attracted so many students that he was forced to study with them in the yard of the main synagogue. He gave courses in Gemara each day, and on Friday he taught the parsha of the week along with Rashi's commentary. He loved his students like a father loves his children, and he was very happy to see them succeed. Among his students were such great rabbis as Rabbi Avraham Danzig (author of Chayei Adam) and others.

Rabbi Yechezkel had a fixed rule that, be it in Torah study or in his approach to Mussar, the main thing was not abstract study but action. It was not the discussion that counted, but the final conclusion. This is why he often comes back, in his responsum and lectures, to the point that the essential thing is not to deny oneself or fast, but to perform good deeds. On the other hand he wrote, "The main thing is diligence in study. One must study Torah works that have true meaning, mishnayot with Tosaphot Yom Tom, the Gemara, the Poskim, the Chumash, the Prophets, and the Writings, as well as books on Mussar."

All this, however, applied to others. With his own person, he was very strict and denied himself. His disciple Rabbi Eliezer Fleckles testifies that to his old age, he did not sleep in a bed, but rather with his head on a bed and his body on some chairs. He also wore a coarse haircloth on his body, and he taught while standing. From the 17th of Tammuz until the beginning of Av, he ate no animal products, and from Rosh Chodesh Av to Tisha B'Av, he only ate dry bread.

Like a shepherd faithful to his flock, Rabbi Yechezkel also devoted himself to the needs of the community. He enacted decrees, dealt with government ministers and emperors, and built up institutions that promoted tzeddakah and chesed. All aspects of Jewish life progressed in accord with his decisions.

Rabbi Yechezkel died on Iyar 17, 5553 (1793) in Prague. He ordered that neither praises nor orations be multiplied at his funeral, that a large headstone not be placed on his grave, and that no glorious titles be inscribed on it. He left numerous works behind, including Noda B'Yehuda, Hatzlacha (Tzion L'Nefesh Chaya) on the Talmud, Ahavat Zion, and Dagul Mei'Revavah.

Many legends surround Rabbi Yechezkel's brilliant character, and these illustrate both his intelligence and sharpness of mind. What follows are some examples:

(1) One day, a merchant carrying wine barrels was traveling from Hungary to his home in Prague. While on route, he encountered a poor Jew from his hometown and gave him a ride in his carriage. The poor man owned a sack filled with money, and since he was afraid of thieves, he hid it among the barrels. Upon arriving in Prague, however, he could not find his money. He therefore accused the merchant of having stolen it, then ran in tears to see Rabbi Yechezkel and cried out to him, "Save me Rabbi!" Rabbi Yechezkel had the merchant brought to him, but he denied everything that the poor man had said, and furthermore he complained that the poor man had paid him back evil for good, since he had helped him out by giving him a ride home. Hence Rabbi Yechezkel resorted to a ruse and said to the merchant, "I believe you – you did not steal the money. Surely it was your driver who stole it. However if that is the case, your wine has become forbidden to drink, for the hand of your non-Jewish driver has touched it." When the merchant heard this decision, he acknowledged his sin and admitted that he had stolen the poor man's money. However the Rav was not satisfied with this, and he said to him, "Since you began by denying this with all your might, I will not believe you until you swear in synagogue, before the entire community, that you stole this poor man's money." The merchant did what Rabbi Yechezkel said, and only then did he allow the merchant's wine to be sold.

(2) Two Torah greats of Israel came to see the Rav of Prague concerning the mitzvah of redeeming prisoners. "How much money do you need?" Rabbi Yechezkel asked them. They replied, "1,000 gold coins." The Rav went into his room and brought them 990 gold coins. Looking at the amount, they said in astonishment: "Why did the Rav not add 10 more gold coins in order for the mitzvah to belong to him?" Rabbi Yechezkel replied, "I'm surprised that two great rabbis such as yourselves would ask such a question! Have you forgotten the explicit words of the Mishnah: 'One who wishes to give but that others should not – he looks grudgingly toward others' [Perkei Avoth 5: 13]. I too must allow others to participate in this mitzvah."

Rabbi Yechezkel was also marvelously clever in matters of everyday life, and he knew how to act with the most diverse types of people.

(3) Two rich men once came to see him for an unusual Din Torah. What happened was that these two men lived in the same building and were good neighbors. One day, a poor musician came and stood at the door of the building and began to play some music. The two rich men began to argue, each one saying: "He's playing for me!" That's when they decided to go see the Rav. First of all, each of them deposited 20 gold coins to cover the costs of the proceedings. At that point the Rav began to hear their strange arguments, and then he smiled and said to them: "It was not for any of you that the musician played, but for me – so that I could merit 40 gold coins."

(4) A man came to see Rabbi Yechezkel to recount his troubles to him. "What can I do for you?" he asked. The man replied, "In my house, people are constantly coming and going, and this bothers me and prevents me from studying." Rabbi Yechezkel said to him, "Let me give you some good advice. If those who come to you are rich, ask them to lend you some money – you won't see them again. And if they are poor, lend them some money – you won't see them again either."

THE MORAL OF THE STORY FROM THE MAGGID OF DUBNO

It is written, “But none could interpret them for Pharaoh” (Genesis 41:8). The Midrash states that interpretations were brought forth, but Pharaoh was not satisfied with any of them. Some interpretations viewed the seven cows as being seven daughters that Pharaoh would have, others that the seven beautiful ears of grain were seven kingdoms that he would conquer, and so on. Citing the verse, “The scoffer seeks wisdom yet there is none, but wisdom will come easily to an understanding one” (Proverbs 14:6), the Midrash states that “the scoffer” represents Pharaoh’s wise men and the magicians of Egypt, while “an understanding one” signifies Joseph.

We must understand why the Midrash cites this verse from Proverbs, one that does not seem very pertinent to the subject because Scripture itself explicitly recognizes the wisdom and knowledge of Pharaoh’s magicians (Genesis 41:8). Does the Midrash not disparage them by its remarks?

A parable will allow us to see this in another light.

A powerful king had an only son who was not very intelligent, and he thought to himself, “My son will succeed me on the throne, yet he is neither knowledgeable nor wise!” He decided to send him to study in a renowned university, and there he stayed several years and learned many things. He then asked his father to bring him home, for at that point he knew everything that he needed to know. The king sent his most prestigious ministers to bring him back, and he was so happy to see his son that he held a great banquet for the royal court. When everyone had had something to drink, one of the ministers thought of testing the wisdom and knowledge of the prince, and so he asked him what he had learned while in university. The prince mentioned many subjects: Mathematics, chemistry, physics, philosophy, and so on. The minister then took a round ring and grasped it in his hand. He then stretched out his clenched fist to the prince and asked him to guess what he was hiding inside. The prince took his hand, looked at it carefully, sought to apply the rules of science that he had learned in university, and then declared that in his opinion the minister was holding a round, hollow object. Stunned, the minister could not hold back: “That’s perfectly correct! Perhaps you can tell me exactly what it is?” The prince replied, “Scientific principles and the laws of nature cannot reveal the object’s identity to me. I can only deduce in a general way if the object is round or square, hollow or filled, but not details pertaining to the object’s exact nature.” Yet pushed by those in attendance, he thought for a moment and exclaimed, “It’s probably a millstone, since it has exactly the same shape.” He thus proved the depth of his stupidity. True, he had become as learned as he could be, but as for knowing how to evaluate

things on his own, he was completely inept because that depended on innate intelligence, not acquired knowledge.

The magicians knew how to understand dreams according to all the rules of dream interpretation, yet this method could only reveal generalities. For example, the seven fat cows signified something positive that occurred seven times over, and so too for the seven beautiful ears of grain. This led the magicians to suppose that the dreams referred to seven countries, without realizing how untenable this view was. In fact, it was more likely that the seven beautiful ears of grain and seven fat cows alluded to seven years of abundance, for as Rashi says: “In times of abundance, creatures appear fine-looking.” The magicians’ interpretations therefore proved their ignorance and stupidity, which connects to what the Midrash says: “‘The scoffer seeks wisdom yet there is none’ (Proverbs 14:6). They looked for an interpretation in the wisdom of their heart and found none, whereas ‘wisdom will come easily to an understanding one’ – this is Joseph.”

THE STORY OF THE WEEK BY THE MERIT OF THE RAV’S WISDOM

An honorable woman of Romania’s Yassi community once came to see Rabbi Israel Gutman, the Rav of the town. Her face was filled with such bitterness that it could also be heard in her voice as she exclaimed, “Rabbi, I can’t tolerate the suffering that my husband inflicts upon me any longer. I’m not leaving here before the Rav promises that he will obtain a get for me. I want a divorce!”

“I am ready to obtain a divorce for you,” the Rabbi gently replied, “but only if you follow my instructions.”

“What instructions?” the woman said, as if gasping for air.

“Every Friday night for a month, you must go to the homes of the poor in our town and distribute bread and meat in honor of Shabbat to those that live there. At the end of a month, I will obtain a divorce for you.”

The woman committed herself to this task, and then she left the Rav’s home.

After a month, since the woman did not return to the Rav to demand her get, the Rav sent for her. “Why didn’t you return at the end of a month?” he asked. She replied, “Every Friday when I went to the homes of the poor, I saw true misery. I realized that some people suffer much more than I, and so I’ve decided that it’s better not to get a divorce.”

In her heart the woman added, “It was only by the merit of the Rav’s wisdom that I saw the truth and made my decision.”