

The Path To Follow

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The Lights of Chanukah: Instructions for the Service of Hashem

The Sages instituted the festival of Chanukah in order for us to praise Hashem and express our gratitude to Him (Shabbat 21b). Despite the fact that the Greeks had defiled the oil of the Beit Hamikdash, the Children of Israel eventually found a small flask of oil possessing the seal of the Kohen Gadol. This small amount of pure oil, discovered by miracle, would allow the Menorah to remain lit for a single day, and yet it miraculously lasted for eight days. To commemorate this event, our Sages instituted the lighting of candles each day for eight days. According to the Halachah (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 672:2), this mitzvah consists of allowing them to burn for a minimum of 30 minutes each night.

We need to take a closer look at this subject. If our Sages wanted us to regard the miracle experienced by the Hasmoneans as if we ourselves had experienced it, then why did they limit the minimum time for lighting the candles to 30 minutes? Perhaps it would have been better to keep the candles burning throughout the eight days without interruption, adding oil to them [oil candles] each night? Constantly seeing these lights would infuse us with a reminder of this miracle, especially since the western light of the Menorah in the Beit Hamikdash burned night and night without ever going out (Shabbat 22b).

Our Sages never impose a restriction on the community if the majority cannot keep it (Bava Kama 79b, Bava Batra 60b). Better to grasp but a small amount, for “if you grasp much, you cannot hold it. If you grasp little, you can hold it” (Rosh Hashanah 4b). If we had been obligated to burn candles for eight consecutive days, their presence would have become commonplace, and our perception of the miracle being evoked would have been diminished. Our Sages wanted a person to have an intense reminder of the miracle that G-d performed for the Hasmoneans, to feel it deep inside, in order to achieve a personal renewal. Hence they felt it prudent to stipulate that they remain lit for a minimum of just 30 minutes.

In examining the issue more closely, we also understand why this mitzvah must be fulfilled precisely at sundown (Shabbat 21b, Orach Chaim 672:2). In fact the miracle that occurred in the Beit Hamikdash assumes its full importance at that point in the day, since the kohanim rekindled the lamps of the Menorah towards evening. Likewise, in lighting the chanukiah as the day draws to an end, everyone can better recall the words of our Sages: “A little light dismisses much darkness.”

What does this light symbolize? It is written, “For a mitzvah is a lamp and the Torah is light” (Mishlei 6:23). The Menorah’s lamps and light represent the mitzvot and Torah respectively. We mentioned earlier that we light the Chanukah candles for a limited time so that this mitzvah, by its unique character, retains its full value. Likewise we must apply ourselves in order for our Torah not to become something routine. We must put an effort into learning Torah and fulfilling mitzvot with enthusiasm that is constantly renewed.

Thus each person must be aware that the essential thing is not to know the Talmud and all the works of the poskim, but rather to study in order to put his understanding into practice. As our Sages teach, “Not study,

but practice is the essential thing” (Pirkei Avoth 1:17). It is through such action that we can learn even more.

We learn still more lessons from the celebration of Chanukah, which commemorates the victory of the Jews over the Greeks. Our Sages wanted us to remember that the decrees which the Greeks enacted to make us forget the Torah and transgress its laws only existed because the Children of Israel left a door open to sin, as it is written: “Sin is crouching at the door” (Bereshith 4:7). Because they allowed themselves to lose respect for the holy Torah and its mitzvot, they were commanded: “Write on the horn of an ox that you have no portion in the G-d of Israel” (Bereshith Rabba 2:4).

During this time of the year, we must double our efforts for the Torah in order to rectify the error of the Children of Israel, who were more or less responsible for the decrees which aimed at making them forget the Torah.

This is the sense of the aforementioned verse: “For a mitzvah is a lamp and the Torah is light.” We must run to do mitzvot; we cannot delay in performing a mitzvah whenever it presents itself to us. Rather, we must carry it out immediately (Mechilta, Bo 12). This approach is diametrically opposed to the eradication of Torah and mitzvot.

Thus the mitzvah which corresponds to the behavior required of us is lighting the chanukiah. As soon as the time comes, we stop all our work to light its candles, impatient on fulfilling this mitzvah. The order to add an additional candle each night (Shabbat 21b) alludes to our lives, in which we must go out to fight in the service of G-d and to improve ourselves in this area each day.

Regarding this subject, our Sages also state (Shabbat 23a) that whoever has a courtyard with two entrances from two different directions is obligated to light a chanukiah at each entrance. Why? In order to proclaim the miracle of Chanukah in every direction, so that there is no doubt as to whether the mitzvah has been fulfilled. This last reason also contains an allusion: Each person must demonstrate his love for Hashem in every possible way, putting an effort into Torah and mitzvot, and sanctifying G-d’s Name by avoiding the least suspicion of having committed a transgression, as it is written: “You shall be guiltless before Hashem and before Israel” (Bamidbar 32:22).

Having explained that a person must demonstrate his enthusiasm for Torah, we can understand why the best way to fulfill this mitzvah involves lighting the Chanukah candles with olive oil. If a person’s heart is set on fulfilling Torah and mitzvot, and on progressing each day in his service of Hashem, and if he sanctifies G-d’s Name without arousing any suspicious as to having transgressed, this will have a restorative effect on his soul, this entire concept being related to olive oil.

In fact the term hashemen (“the oil”) is composed of the same letters as neshama (“soul”). Furthermore, the term zayit (“olive”) is composed of three letters (zayin, yud, tav). The combined numerical value of zayin (7) and yud (10) is 17, equal to that of the word tov (“good”). Now there is

no good but Torah (Berachot 5a). Finally, the letter tav (numerical value: 400) alludes to Esav's forces of impurity, for Esav came against Jacob with his 400 warriors (Bereshith 32:7). This means that whoever illuminates his soul through Torah and mitzvot, which represent good, will be saved from the impurity of Esav. Everyone is obligated to constantly learn, for the word chanukah comes from the same root as chinuch ("education"). By the merit of constant learning, a person will escape the impurity of Esav and his followers, for the impurity of Hellenism stems from Esav.

Finally, the very essence of the candles alludes to something extraordinary. These lights are in fact sacred, and we do not have the right to use

them; we can only look at them. Where do we find an allusion to this? The light of a candle alludes to the life of man, as it is written: "A man's soul is the lamp of Hashem" (Mishlei 20:27). Thus a man's life must be sacred, meaning that it cannot be used for mundane purposes.

We must not be among those who waste their days pursuing the pleasures of this world. Rather, we can only "look" upon them. In other words, we should take advantage of each day in order to invest ourselves in the light of Torah, which is unique and constitutes the only source of true joy. By doing so, we will be able to sanctify and purify ourselves, and to connect ourselves with the Creator of all the worlds. Amen.

At the Source

Estranged

It is written, "Behold, seven other cows emerged after them" (Bereshith 41:3).

What does the term "other" teach us? That when times are bad, people avoid each other and become 'other' [i.e., estranged] to one another. If someone enters a town from a distant place and his friend is sitting in the street, he will turn his head away and pretend not to see him, or to have ever known him.

What is the reason for this? The hunger and plagues that reign in the world.

– Midrash Hagadol

The Act of Covering

It is written, "The seven lean ears [of grain] swallowed them" (Bereshith 41:7).

Can we say that the ears of grain had a mouth, such that they could swallow?

Pharaoh simply saw these ears of grain rising and covering the seven full ears. It was this process of covering that is described by the term "swallowed."

Thus it is written, "They shall not come and look as the holy is 'swallowed'" (Bamidbar 4:20). This simply means that they are being covered.

– Lekach Tov

Better to be Last

It is written, "He sent and summoned all the magicians of Egypt" (Bereshith 41:8).

Why did he do this? [That is, why did Hashem not lead the chief cupbearer to mention Joseph immediately, rather than allowing the magicians to be summoned?]

It was in order for Joseph to come last, and to attain power.

The Holy One, blessed be He, said: "If Joseph comes first and interprets the dream, it will not greatly add to his honor. The magicians will be able to say: 'If we had been asked, we too could have interpreted it.'" However the Holy One, blessed be He, waited for everyone to weary and exhaust Pharaoh, at which point Joseph came and gave him hope.

It is in this regard that King Solomon said, "The fool vents all his anger, but then the wise man comes and assuages it" (Mishlei 29:11). The fool – these are the magicians of Pharaoh; the wise man – this is Joseph, as it is written: "There is none so intelligent and wise as you" (Bereshith 41:39).

– Midrash Hagadol

He Left Us

It is written, "Me and the chief baker" (Bereshith 41:10).

This is surprising, for why didn't he say "us"?

It is because the chief cupbearer had established a distinction between himself and the chief baker, who was hanged.

The same applies today, for when someone mentions a person who has died, he says: "He left us."

– Midrash Zekenim

Calculated Responsibilities

It is written, "He restored me to kani [my position]" (Bereshith 41:13).

What does the term kani signify?

Our Sages say, "At first, the chief cupbearer was responsible for 20 men, and then he was made responsible for 50."

After he sinned before Pharaoh, however, he was made responsible for only 10.

How do we know this? The term kani is comprised of letters having a numerical value of 20 (caph), 50 (nun), and 10 (yud).

– Midrash Habiur

Tzafnat Pa'aneach

It is written, "Pharaoh called Joseph's name Tzafnat Pa'aneach" (Bereshith 41:45).

The Sages say that Tzafnat Pa'aneach is an acronym for the following:

Tzadi: Tzofeh [seer] – he saw the future.

Peh: Podeh [redeemer] – he saved and redeemed Egypt.

Nun: Navi [prophet] – he prophesized the future.

Tav: Tomek [supporter].

Peh: Poter [interpreter] – he interpreted dreams.

Ayin: Arum [clever] – he was wise.

Nun: Navon [discreet].

Chet: Chozeh [seer] – he could see.

– Bereshith Rabba 90:4

Guard Your Tongue!

Rectifying the Sin of Lashon Harah

If a person has already transgressed by listening to Lashon Harah and he has believed it in his heart, to rectify this sin he must strive to remove these thoughts from his heart. He must resolve to never believe them again, commit himself to no longer accept Lashon Harah about a Jew, and confess his sin. In this way, the transgressions that he committed will be rectified.

– Chafetz Chaim

Concerning the Parsha

Rabbi Chaim's Chanukiah of Chesed

Those living in the home of the gaon Rabbi Chaim of Sanz were used to seeing all kinds of valuables “disappear.” In fact the tzaddik would usually keep nothing unnecessary at home if it was requested by the poor... which was always the case.

To him, it made absolutely no difference if he gave away money or valuables. When the Rebbetzin noticed that a certain object was missing, she knew that her husband had used it as collateral to obtain money for helping a financially broken man, or to support an orphan and the like. Thus almost all their valuables disappeared: A silver cup, a box for fragrant herbs, a goblet, a beautiful set of candlesticks....

About a month before Chanukah, a gaunt-looking Jew from a distant land came knocking at the door of the tzaddik. His behavior and manner of speech proved that he had been well-off and respected in the past. From his bag, the man took out a document which certified that he descended from a noble family which went back generations. After presenting himself, he began to pour out his heart to the tzaddik. Melting into tears, he described his present-day poverty and said that his daughter had attained the age of marriage, but he had no way to provide for her dowry.

With kind and tender eyes, Rabbi Chaim gazed at the man before him. “The deliverance of Hashem arrives in the blink of an eye,” he said to him. At the same time, he tried hard to think of a possible source of deliverance.

He arose and began to pace, checking off all the “shelters” that he used to stash money for “special cases.” However he quickly realized that all his “stashes” had been emptied-out long ago.

He then starting looking all around him, hoping to find an object of value, but to no avail. The shelves and storage units that he would normally use were completely empty. Everything was already in the hands of debtors.

The thought of this unfortunate Jew being forced to return home empty-handed made the tzaddik's heart grow heavy. “Chanukah will soon arrive, the festival of light and joy. Yet what joy will there be in the home of this poor man?” the tzaddik said to himself. Suddenly, the thought of Chanukah triggered an idea. “Chanukah,” he murmured.

“Yes, Chanukah!” A large smile appeared on his radiant face.

Like a young child, the esteemed tzaddik took a chair and brought it next to the bureau in the corner of his room. He quickly climbed on the chair to get to the top of the bureau. With nimble hands, he grabbed hold of a beautiful and imposing silver chanukiah from the upper shelf, holding it with love as he descended from the chair. Blowing lightly on it, he removed the dust that had accumulated on it since the previous year. He immediately wrapped it in paper in order not to expose it to the evil eye.

The man was looking at the tzaddik during all this time, first with a certain degree of puzzlement, then with joy, and finally with a spark of hope when he realized that the chanukiah which the tzaddik was giving him was now his. It was going to serve as a source of revenue and deliverance.

It was only a week before Chanukah that the Rebbetzin was stunned to realize that their chanukiah was missing. Contrary to what other ladies of the house would do under similar circumstances, she did not begin to cry hysterically. She was perfectly aware that it wasn't a thief who had come to their home. Nevertheless, her heart grew heavy. “People will be lighting the candles of a beautiful chanukiah in every Jewish home, whereas in our home – in the home of the tzaddik – we won't be!”

On the eve of the festival she mentioned to her husband, as if in passing, that they didn't have a chanukiah. The tzaddik reacted serenely, with a hint of a smile hidden beneath his thick mustache.

The night of Chanukah arrived. The townspeople hastened to pray Mincha in order to return home and light the first candle. Little by little, tiny lights began to appear in the windows and doors of people's homes, with only one exception: The home of the tzaddik. It was like a regular day in his home, with no chanukiah to be seen.

During this time, the Rav was in his room delving into the secrets of the Torah regarding the time of Chanukah. The members of his household, saddened and upset, tried not to expose their feelings to their father, for they didn't want to increase his sorrow.

It was then that the door to the tzaddik's room opened and he appeared in all his splendor. He emerged as if preparing to light...but people still didn't know how or with what.

Suddenly the noise of a carriage was heard near their house. Harnessed to two horses, it was beautiful to behold. When its door opened, an elegantly-dressed couple stepped out, carrying a wrapped package. They apologized for intruding at such a time, but it was understandable, given their anxiety, that they wanted to see the tzaddik for an urgent matter. Rabbi Chaim brought them into his office and had a short meeting with them. They explained their distress to him, and he rained words of consolation and blessing upon them.

Finally, the man placed the package on the table and delicately removed the wrapping. “This object is a gift, a pidyon nefesh,” he said as he unwrapped it completely. It was a silver chanukiah, tall and shimmering, standing in all its splendor. Everything proceeded quite easily at that point: The tzaddik matter-of-factly placed the chanukiah in the spot meant for it, poured out some pure olive oil, and set up the wick. He held the shamash in his right hand and recited the blessings in front of his family and the invited couple: “...to light the lights of Chanukah ... Who performed miracles for our ancestors ... Who has kept us alive, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this season.” As we can well-imagine, these three blessing were infused with additional, special significance during this extraordinary lighting.

In the Light of the Parsha

The Essence of Human Life is a Life of Torah

The Gemara says that when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oil which they found there. When the Hasmoneans defeated them, they found just a single flask of oil that carried the seal of the Kohen Gadol, and it contained just enough oil to light the Menorah for one day. A miracle occurred at that point, for the oil from this flask lasted for eight days. The following year, the Sages established a festival, with the recitation of Hallel, in order to thank Hashem.

When the Hasmoneans fought the Greeks, they had to fight not only against Greek foreigners, but also against Hellenized Jews, who had become like strangers because they were immersed in Greek wisdom. However their approach to one group did not resemble their approach to the other, for the Hasmoneans killed the wicked Greeks who sought to defile them and make them forget the Torah, but they could not do the same to Hellenized Jews. In fact it is written, “As I live – the word of Hashem G-d – I do not desire the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked returns from his way, that he may live. Repent, repent from your evil ways! Why should you die, O house of Israel?” (Ezekiel 33:1). Hence they did not seek to kill them, but rather to bring them back to the right path. How did the tzaddikim lead the wicked into repentance? It was by teaching them, so they could learn Torah rather than study Greek wisdom, for the latter is a deadly poison while the Torah is an elixir of life. Having killed the Greek foreigners, they immediately entered the Temple to light the Menorah, which alludes to the

Continuation Page 4

Holy Torah, as the Sages have said on the verse, “For the mitzvah is a lamp and the Torah is light” (Mishlei 6:23): “The verse identifies a mitzvah with a lamp and the Torah with light. The mitzvah [is identified] with a lamp in order to tell you that just as a lamp only protects temporarily, likewise a mitzvah only protects temporarily. The Torah [is identified] with light in order to tell you that just as light protects permanently, likewise the Torah protects permanently” (Sotah 21a). They wanted to teach us that the essence of human life is a life of Torah, not the life of Greek wisdom or the vanities of this world.

When the wicked began returning to the Torah, its light immediately drew them closer to the right path, and assimilated Jews became fewer in number each day, until eventually none remained. This is because the light of the Torah led them to repentance, and they rejected the wisdom of the Greeks.

Hence the Sages also included the first day within the festival, for the

Prayer

Whoever saw the gaon and tzaddik Rabbi Israel Meir Hacoen Zatzal of Radin (the author of Chafetz Chaim) as he prayed did not easily forget this moving and awe-inspiring sight. One could see the love for the Creator that burned in him, to the very depths of his being. He seemed completely detached from this world, as if only his soul was whispering a prayer. His mind was inundated with a celestial light, and the skin of his face shined with the brilliance of the Shechinah, which rested upon him.

What follows is a special account from the book Chafetz Chaim: The Life and Works of Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan of Radin: “Each word of prayer emerged from his mouth with sanctity, purity, and tremendous concentration. Indeed, long after prayers had ended, it was difficult for him to turn his thoughts to other subjects and to descend ‘from the mountain to the people.’

“As was his habit, he prayed with reverential fear, his back curved and his head lowered. On his enflamed face reigned an expression of joy, and he was filled with fear. Hidden and concealed in his heart was the flame of a sacred fire, his shoulders moved a little, and his entire body burned with trembling and sweat. The lips of the Chafetz Chaim Zatzal whispered a prayer like from a voice that we didn’t hear, and his entire attitude spoke of simplicity, submission, and humility. Throughout the year, he did not linger in prayer for long, even though he generally was unable to pray Shemoneh Esrei with the community, but only with the shaliach tzibur. It sometimes happened that he would suddenly burst into tears, and when he saw that the public was waiting for him, he tapped on the shtender as a sign not to wait for him.”

A Great Yom Tov

Those who wrote the story of the gaon Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach Zatzal, the Rosh Yeshiva of Kol Torah, said the following of him:

The Rosh Yeshiva always came to pray with the public before the set time. Upon his arrival, he would sit for a certain time to prepare himself. As the Kohen Gadol would do in preparing himself to make an offering to Hashem, he would stand in prayer before his Creator with fear and trembling. He would prolong his prayer by voicing words from his mouth like someone counting coins, one after the other.

He did not raise his hands with fervor, nor did he raise his voice. With concentration, calm, and submission, he voiced his words with tranquilly and counted them like one who counts coins. Clearly, with lofty intentions and a broken heart, his entire appearance testified: “I am Hashem’s servant.”

His prayer was a demonstration of the verse, “All my bones will say: ‘Who is like You, Hashem?’” (Tehillim 35:10). Yet with uncommon skill, he knew how to conceal this appearance, hiding his burning flame within himself.

When his student, the gaon Yaakov Ades Shlita (the Rosh Yeshiva of Kol Yaakov), asked him questions on prayer, he said: “If a day passes in which I’ve recited the three prayers of Shacharit, Mincha, and Ma’ariv with the proper focus, for me it is a great Yom Tov, truly a festival day.”

Those who understood, and who followed his prayer, explicitly testified to the fact that for him each day was like Yom Tov. For him, the work involved

day in which they found the oil seemed to indicate to them that the Hellenized Jews would repent, that Greek wisdom would disappear, and that the wisdom of the Torah would take its place. We may add that the term hashemen (“the oil”) is formed by the same letters as neshama (“soul”), for on account of the oil, the souls of Jews were purified during the time of the Hasmoneans. That is why they could not light with impure oil, since pure oil was required to purify hearts.

We can also understand why the Sages established this festival for all the generations. It is because each year, everyone can be cleansed of profane “wisdom” by the light of the Torah that shines on Chanukah. Just as Shimon HaTzaddik in his generation abolished Greek wisdom, so too did the Hasmoneans abolish it in theirs. Likewise, every person can abolish in himself the wisdom of the nations in order to study the holy Torah exclusively, for its light will return him to the right path.

in praying was one of the most difficult services of the Temple. In his prayers, he poured out his heart like water for the sick among the Jewish people, whose illnesses and pains he bore. Indeed, he suffered in their sufferings.

Numerous requests and supplications, stories of problems and illnesses, reached his desk each day. After having smiled at his guests, after having calmed and consoled them, he would turn his face to the wall and immerse himself in a book of Tehillim, as burning tears dripped from his eyes.

His tears ascended before the Throne of Glory and pierced the Heavens. They tore up the firmament, overturned worlds, and annulled evil decrees.

Those saved by his prayers were completely aware of this. In fact there were many who were fully aware of it.

Crowds of people regularly knocked at his door. In order to remind him of their requests, they would leave small notes in his prayer book at the place for the blessing of refaeinu (“heal us”), along with the names of the sick and those in need of deliverance.

It is said that someone once mentioned the name of a sick person to him. The Rav replied by saying, “Three weeks ago, someone already gave me this person’s name.” He constantly carried these names in his heart, never forgetting them. They were engraved in his mind in order not to be erased.

It was an awe-inspiring sight to see our teacher standing in prayer for the blessing of refaeinu. From his pocket, he would take out a sheet of paper that had been moistened by his tears, and on it were the names of the sick and depressed. His lips trembled, and his eyes – raised to the heavens – poured out tears. He interceded with G-d on behalf of His children, who were steeped in pain and isolation.

One day, a person addressed him in order to intercede for someone who had fallen ill. He said to this person, “Know that I’ve already mentioned his name in prayer once before, and I don’t have the strength to do it again!”

Between My Creator and Me

A young child of the tzaddik Rabbi Salman Moutsafi Zatzal once fell ill. On Shabbat, the tzaddik was told that the boy’s condition was growing worse, and that his life was in danger.

During Mincha, when the ark was opened, the tzaddik stood next to it and interceded in a whisper for the healing of the child. When he returned home for Seuda Shelishith, the Rebbetzin asked him: “Did you pray for the boy?” The tzaddik replied, “Yes, I whispered a prayer for the boy when the ark was opened.”

The face of the Rebbetzin expressed her displeasure.

The tzaddik turned to her and said, “Did you want all the congregants to hear my cries? It’s something that’s between my Creator and me alone. He responds to whispers. He hears whoever calls upon Him in truth.”

That very same night, the boy’s health began to improve.