

The
CHASSIDUS
PERSPECTIVE
with Reb Yoel Kahn



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THE CHANUKAH STORY: A DEEPER LOOK

Chanukah, the Gemara tells us, is a celebration of the discovery of a single jug of oil which ultimately burned miraculously for eight days, after the Greeks had rendered all other oil impure.

The Gemara's wording implies that the Greeks wantonly contaminated the oil (and not that they just happened to touch it, thus rendering it impure). Presumably, the Greeks' intent in doing so was to bring the *avodah* to a halt. Yet their actions are somewhat perplexing, since the more reasonable thing from their perspective would have been to simply pour the oil out.

What's more, attempting to create halachic problems was of dubious usefulness. The commentators question why the Jews did not use the impure oil to light the menorah, as "impurity is disregarded in the case of a communal service." The *misyavanim* that accompanied the Greeks surely knew about this possible halachic loophole. If so, why did the Greeks specifically choose to make the oil impure, instead of employing the simpler solution of destroying it?

"AS LONG AS IT MAKES SENSE!"

The Greeks were not out to wage a physical war against the Jews, rather (to quote the *Ve'al Hanissim* prayer) "*l'hashkicham torasecha ul'haaviram meichukei retzonecha*," to wage a spiritual war against Torah and mitzvos. Moreover, in their battle against Judaism, they specifically targeted the spiritual component.

The more reasonable thing from the Greeks' perspective would have been to simply pour the oil out!

The Frieddiker Rebbe famously stressed that the Greeks were not offended by the Torah as an intellectual pursuit or by the mitzvos that are sensible instructions. What they could not accept was "*torasecha*," the notion that the Torah was divine, and "*chukei retzonecha*," the mitzvos in the category of *chukim*, which we obey because they are Hashem's Will.

The Rebbe points out that the wording used in *Ve'al Hanissim* is not simply "*chukim*" but "*chukei retzonecha*." This implies that even *chukim* were deemed acceptable by the Greeks, as long as they are observed on rational grounds.

How can *chukim* be observed rationally? Let's take an analogy of a child entrusted in the hands of a dedicated mentor. The child has received consistently sound guidance from the mentor in the past, and he is then faced with a piece of advice which

he cannot comprehend. If he is foolish, he will conclude that while the previous guidance was indeed beneficial, this particular advice was erroneous. But if he is sufficiently intelligent, the logical thing to do is to consider his mentor's track record and realize that in this case, his childish intellect is unable to grasp its depth.

Likewise, even the laws of *parah adumah*, the quintessential *chok*, can be practiced on a rational basis. Although we are unable to understand its reason, we can accept it in view of the fact that Hashem and the Torah are so great, and we should expect not to grasp everything.

WHY CONTAMINATE?

The Greeks were the champions of rationality at the time, possessing a worldview in which everything must be based on human intellect. Accordingly, they were comfortable with learning Torah as any other science, and with fulfilling mitzvos which possess a logical foundation. What's more, they even tolerated observing *chukim* on the grounds that some things are beyond our comprehension, and we can rely on an intellect greater than our own. What disturbed them was "*chukei*

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retzonecha," the desire to simply act on Hashem's Will, and they took offense at the notion that spirituality and holiness are part and parcel of Torah and mitzvos.

This is why they deliberately took action to render the oil in the Beis Hamikdash impure. Oil is associated (both in Kabbalah and Gemara) with wisdom. By contaminating the oil, they were delivering the following message:

"If you wish to kindle the menorah, to illuminate the world with your wisdom, we'll allow it. Although we view our intellectual tradition as being superior, if you believe that your 'oil'—the wisdom of Torah—possesses valuable ideals, so be it. But why does it need to be pure? Purity and impurity is an irrational, abstract concept. To stubbornly insist on having pure oil means to suggest that holiness is a factor. Your 'blind faith' contradicts our entire worldview!"

The aim therefore wasn't to pour the oil out and make lighting the menorah impossible, because they had no issue with the Jews sharing their intellectual ideals. Rather, they intended to extinguish its holiness.

BATTLE BEYOND LOGIC

It was this assault which triggered the Jewish response of *mesiras nefesh*. The *chashmona'im* fought for "*chukei retzonecha*," demonstrating that our dedication to Hashem's Will is not based on intellectual calculations but is founded on pure, unadulterated faith.

This is also the significance of the discovery of the jug of oil with the seal of the Kohen Gadol. Seemingly, to ensure that the oil was pure, all that was necessary was for it to be sealed. Why does the Gemara emphasize whose seal it was?

On a deeper level, the Kohen Gadol, who would enter the Holy of Holies, represents the Jewish core. Through their *mesiras nefesh*,

the *chashmona'im* succeeded in awakening this level.

AN ALEF ON A ZAYIN

However, finding the jug of oil was just the first step. What was truly miraculous was that it burned for eight days.

The Midrash comments that the Hebrew word "*az*" is comprised of *alef*, one, and *zayin*, seven, and the *alef* "rides" upon the *zayin*.

What does this mean?

Seven represents worldliness, as exemplified in the pattern of seven which repeats itself throughout the universe (the seven days of the week, the seven moving celestial beings, and so on). The number one, on the other hand, represents Hashem's presence.

The *alef*, however, can stand alone from the *zayin*. This is representative of a Jew who is roused to *mesiras nefesh* when challenged by those who wish to sever his connection with Hashem, or who is inspired on Yom


Kippur. The Holy of Holies of the year inspires the Holy of Holies of his *neshamah*, but his daily life is otherwise disconnected from this reality. Of course, he is a devout Jew, but his usual attitude is logical and calculated.

The ultimate accomplishment is for the *alef* to "ride upon" and permeate the *zayin*. For the *alef* to be revealed is not a wondrous feat; after all, that is the essential nature of a Jew. But this Jewish essence must be channeled into one's intellectual and emotional character, affecting the practical elements of daily life.

This was the ultimate miracle of Chanukah. The jug of oil associated with *mesiras nefesh* burned for an additional seven days; the superrational devotion and inspiration felt by the *chashmona'im* did not peter out, but had a tangible effect on their daily existence.

For further learning see ד"ה ת"ר מצות נר חנוכה תשל"ח

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merkazanash.com
info@merkazanash.com
347.471.1770

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