

CHANNUKAH — UP or DOWN ?

*Freely adapted from Rabbi Mendel Weinbach's lecture, "Talmudic Insights into Channukah."
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The basic Mitzvah of Channukah is to celebrate "the miracle that happened then" by lighting the Channukah Menorah for each of the eight days. But how many lights? As is widely known, there is a dispute in the Talmud between Beis Shammai and Beis Hillel whether to increase the number of lights each day, from one to eight, or to start from eight and diminish one light each day for the eight days. Although the definitive Halochah rules according to Beis Hillel and we therefore start with one light and add one each night, it is worthwhile to look at this dispute between Beis Shammai and Beis Hillel for the many insights into Channukah that this will give us.

Beis Shammai's rationale for going downwards, from eight lights on the first night to one on the eighth night, is based on the *Porrin*, the bullocks brought as *Korbannos* on Sukkos in the time of the Beis HaMikdash. These *Korbannos* were brought in descending order, from thirteen to seven, on each of the seven days of Sukkos. They totalled seventy *Porrin* in all, corresponding to the seventy most prominent Nations of the World.

There are two aspects to these *Porrin*. One aspect is that the Torah commands that we bring these *Korbannos* to teach us that we are to be concerned for the material and spiritual well-being of the entire world. When we bring *Korbannos* in the Beis HaMikdash, we help to bring down from Heaven a spiritual energy and blessings which benefit the whole world. These *Porrin*, therefore, express HaShem's concern for the entire world, because without the blessed and holy benefit that these *Korbannos* bring upon the world, the Nations of the World would be so much more spiritually impoverished. These *Korbannos* are therefore primarily for the Nations of the World.

The second aspect of these *Korbannos* is focussed more on the Jewish People. By bringing these *Korbannos* there is infused a special nationalistic energy into the Jewish People, to remember that they are an elite corps chosen by G-d to be "a light unto the Nations" to inspire them all to things spiritual. At the same time, the seventy *Porrin* were brought in descending order so as to remind the Jewish People that they are to strengthen their resistance to any negative or corrupting pagan influences of those seventy Nations. Lighting the Channukah Menorah in descending order similarly symbolizes and gives expression to the wish that the pagan and negative influences of the Nations of the World should likewise decrease, so that the world shall be elevated and raised above such inferior influences.

The Gemorrah tells us that if the Babylonians and the Romans, who each destroyed the Beis HaMikdash in their own times, would have known and understood the benefits that came to them with the *Korbannos*, they would have come with guards to protect the Beis HaMikdash rather than destroy it. Unfortunately, however, the seventy Nations of the World chose not to understand the reasons for the *Korbannos* in the Beis HaMikdash, or, worse, equated the Divine Service of the Beis HaMikdash with their own perverse sacrificial cults. Following from that Destruction, the Jewish People has suffered greatly and so, too, have the spiritual growth and the elevation of the whole of mankind been so sadly set back.

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Although it is true that the Hellenist Syrians at the time of Channukah did not actually destroy the Beis HaMikdash in the same way as the Babylonians before them or the Romans after them did, they certainly contaminated it. Indeed, for a time during the Hellenist oppression, the Beis HaMikdash was converted into a temple dedicated to the Greek gods and was off-limits to any G-d-fearing Jew.

With the victory of the Chashmono'im, this horrible hiatus came to an end. Channukah primarily celebrates the return of holiness to the Beis HaMikdash after its contamination by the Hellenists. For this reason, Beis Hillel says, since holiness returned to the Beis HaMikdash and since, too, we always move upwards in matters of holiness, we kindle the Channukah lights in ascending order: one light on the first night, two on the second night, and so on till eight on the eighth night.

The first Beis HaMikdash was destroyed by the Babylonians, when the Jewish People suffered the *Gollus Bovel*. The Babylonian Empire came to an end when it was overthrown by the Persians and for the Jewish People *Gollus Bovel* became the *Gollus Porras*. The Persian Empire was overtaken by the Greeks and the Jewish People thus passed into their third *Gollus*, the *Gollus Yovvon*. This third *Gollus* lasted 180 years and this *Gollus*, more than any other, was dubbed “the exile of darkness.” The reason for this is because the Greeks made every effort to make the Jewish People see and understand the world not according to the Divine Torah but in a way that was so alien to the spirit of the Torah. The events of Channukah took place in Eretz Yisroel during the Hellenist oppression, the time of *Gollus Yovvon* and the reason why it is referred to as “the exile of darkness” is because it sought to take away the guiding light of HaShem's Torah and in its stead place human understanding and human values as Man's guiding light. The Greeks taught that the human body, the human intellect, human reasoning, are the greatest. Man, taught the Greeks, is his own master and is neither accountable nor subject to the Divine Will of G-d. Yet it is this Divine Will, as expressed in the Torah, which frees man's spirit from his own enslavement and to the Jewish People there is nothing as dark as the enslavement of the human mind and spirit.

The Possuk says, “And the earth was void and desolate, and darkness was upon the face of the deep, and the Spirit of G-d hovered over the waters.” Our Chachommim teach that here in this *Possuk*, right at the beginning of the history of the world, the Torah hints at the various ages that the world would experience on its journey to perfection and spiritual fulfilment. By understanding that *Possuk* in this wider context, it can indeed be seen how the Torah alludes to these future stages of world history and identifies these different ages. “And the world would be void, and desolate, and darkness, but then the Spirit of G-d will at last come upon the world.” In this context, our Chachommim say: “And ‘darkness’ — this is Greece.” For the Greeks sought to take away the spiritual light that is Torah.

We speak of light as good and of darkness as evil. Darkness is the opposite of light; darkness is evil. But one *can* combat evil in the world. Channukah celebrates a particular historical event, the victory of light over darkness, of good over evil, of freedom over tyranny. But we are left wondering: which strategy is generally the right one? In this world, does one attack evil or should one rather create light so that the darkness of evil simply vanishes?

Look closely at a flame. It has two very distinct properties. It can illuminate and it can burn. In combating evil in this world, are we to set out to destroy it — do we burn it? Or do we create more light in the world so as to dissipate the darkness of evil — do we set out to increase Torah study and Mitzvah observance?

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Beis Shammai and Beis Hillel are both agreed on the purpose and the commemoration that is the kindling of the Channukah Menorah, that kindling the Channukah Menorah represents the triumph of light over darkness and good over evil. They both agree, too, that the number of lights should be different each night. For as with the event of Channukah itself, the eventual triumph will come about step by step rather than in one sudden overthrow of evil. As then, so in the future, too, each day of the miracle is unique: real progress in matters spiritual comes in stages. Man's spiritual level, either of any individual or of Mankind in general, is never at a standstill. With the constant challenges that one encounters in the world, one's "spirit level" changes all the time, either up or down, but changing. Therefore, it was never intended that the lights of Channukah, symbol of Man's spiritual level, should be fixed at the same number all eight days of Channukah. Either up or down, but not pegged at a fixed level.

Beis Shammai holds that the decreasing number of the Channukah lights is symbolic of the decreasing number of *Porrim*. In the same way that the negative and corrupting influences of the prevalent pagan world-culture are overcome through our bringing the seventy *Porrim Korbonnos*, so, too, is our kindling of the Channukah Menorah to bring us to work for decreasing the influences upon us of the modern-day pagan world. Looking at it this way, we should see that property of the flames of the Channukah Menorah — the burning, the destruction, that fire can be — as symbolizing the destruction of the pagan influences in the world. As the miracle of Channukah signalled the diminishing of Greek pagan influences upon the Jewish People at that time, so too is the kindling of the Channukah Menorah today to signal the decrease in the pagan and immoral influences in the world in our own times.

Beis Hillel, on the other hand, says that our task as the People of HaShem is not so much to confront evil head-on but rather to dispel evil and immorality by spreading the light of Torah and Torah values. "A little light dispels a great deal of darkness" and a great amount of light even more so. So, says Beis Hillel, a more effective way of banishing evil is not by burning it away, but by using that other property of flame — that is, to illuminate, to brighten, to enlighten. We can overcome the darkness and evil of G-dlessness by increasing the illumination of Torah everywhere through our greater dedication to Torah study and Mitzvah observance — by becoming once again "a light unto the Nations." For this reason, says Beis Hillel, we increase the number of lights each night: to remind ourselves of our duties and responsibilities *vis-à-vis* the Nations of the World, to be seen once again as the undisputed People of G-d. Therefore, says Beis Hillel, we kindle the Channukah Menorah, increasing the lights each night, in much the same way as we seek to increase awareness of G-d throughout the world and thus be rid of any G-dlessness and evil that there may be.

The Jewish People were called into existence to be "a light unto the Nations." That's our own particular G-d-given rôle in the world. When we do something to bring the light of Torah into the world, we are doing our job and it is good for us and it is good for the world. But when we neglect our duty, when we don't bring the light of Torah to the world, when we aren't learning Torah or observing the Mitzvos, when we try to assimilate — then G-d sends the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Crusaders, Inquisitions, pogroms, Haskalah and "Emancipation," Western "culture" and all the other horrors that we know from our history. They are sent to stimulate us, to wake us up, to arouse us to our original task and purpose.

If we should try to forget our purpose, if we should try to become "like the Nations round about," well, G-d will stop us. He won't tolerate it because He doesn't want the world to sink into a morass of immorality and corruption and He wants us to pull everybody up. He wants us to help to elevate Mankind. And He won't allow us to cop out of our responsibility. If we don't remember our job, then somebody else is going to remind us that we're Jews and that we

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have this responsibility. Why, do you think, have all the attempts of Jews to assimilate failed? And don't think for a moment that Jews haven't tried hard enough to assimilate! Jews have tried — oh! how they have tried! — and in our times perhaps harder than in any other. They have tried to disguise or forget their Jewishness and to just blend in with the rest. They have let their Jewishness lapse, they even intermarry, they try to lose themselves — but the non-Jews still point them out and know that they are Jews. And do you know why these attempts at assimilation, whether by the individual or by the crowd, have failed? They have failed for one simple reason and it is this: We can't change ourselves into another nation. Protest as loudly as you want; say what you want. You might speak their language; you might eat their food; you might dress like them. You might sing their songs or join them in their entertainments and festivities. Pretend as much as you like but there will always be somebody who will recognize some feature of your Jewishness and that somebody is going to remind you of who you really are. Even if he doesn't know it himself, that could very well be his purpose. After all, G-d has many agents at His disposal to send to us to shake us out of our silliness and bring us back to realize who we are. We will never be allowed to be as one of the seventy Nations because G-d has given us a unique rôle to play in His world.

Our Chachommim tell us that the day will come when G-d will come to govern His world. At that time, there will be a great trial, when G-d will judge the actions of the Nations and their motives for those actions. G-d Himself will be the Judge, and He is the Only One Who can know the motives for the actions of the Nations. And G-d will ask each of the Nations: "What did you do to promote awareness of G-d in My world? What did you do to bring good to My world? How did you help in spreading G-dliness?" Of course, the Nations of the World will be quick to point out that they deserve credit for having enabled the Jewish People to learn and teach Torah. They will try to take credit for the way they provided them with such needs and necessities as marketplaces, roads, bridges and so on.

But G-d will reject these claims and tell them: "It is true that your achievements did indeed make things easier for My People. Therefore, you can be said to have assisted them in their sacred task. Nevertheless, I know that this was not your motive, nor your intention. You did what you did for your own selfish reasons: by and large and in the main you intended nothing more than to use the world and its resources for your own benefit and your own physical gratification. If your works were of any use to My People, it was because My Divine plan for the development of the world ensured that your works and efforts should be utilized for the good. Indeed, contrary to your claims, some of you tried your utmost to destroy My People. And yet, even your persecution of My People and your attempts to destroy them, although motivated by jealousy and hatred, has similarly been utilized as part of My Divine plan, for your crude hatred served as a useful tool to remind My People of their special mission in My world."

Therefore, when we kindle the Channukah Menorah in our homes this year once again, let us bear in mind that in our confrontation with the darkness and G-dlessness of this world, we don't want to burn or destroy. We would rather that these sacred flames should illuminate the whole world with G-dliness, with Torah, with goodness. We wish to light the way for all the Nations of the World that they should prosper materially and spiritually. Channukah is an opportunity for us to remember that the formula for overcoming the darkness of today's world is the same as it was in the time of the Hellenist oppression: to increase light. Let us once more dedicate ourselves to being the holy People of G-d, to be once again "a light unto the Nations," radiating light upon all mankind — the light of G-d's Torah and Mitzvah observance, the light of the freedom of the human spirit in happy pursuit of spiritual perfection and the proper enjoyment of G-d's blessings in His world.