

Mikeitz 5773 The Hidden Miracles of Hanukkah

Shabbat Shalom.

Have you been to CVS recently?

Have you seen the end-caps in the store with Hanukkah supplies selling everything from traditional Hanukkah menorahs to electric pins?

Have you been listening at Shaw's? There are actually Hanukkah songs among their Christmas song selections!

You might want to ask: "Is this a good thing or a bad thing?"

On the good side, it's clear that Jews have arrived. We make up less than 1/4 of 1% of the world's population, and even in America, less than 2%, (although we are something like 8% of the voting population, but that's a sermon for another day).

While in our immediate area I would suspect that we are somewhere around 10-15% of the population, we have arrived with our own supermarket displays!

On the bad side, much of this is because folks are trying to make money off of Hanukkah. Just as Christmas has been overly commercialized, Hanukkah has been swept away in this tsunami of materialism and financial opportunities.

Another not necessarily great side to the popularization of Hanukkah is that everyone thinks it's an important holiday.

Professor Art Green told me about a Protestant professor who was presenting a talk about Judaism, in which his colleague said that American Judaism has three great major festivals: Yom Kippur, Hanukkah, and Passover.

Now on one level, he is wrong because Hanukkah is a very minor festival in our tradition. As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, it is neither in the Torah nor in the Tenakh, the Hebrew Bible. It's not even a day when we need to take off from work except the days that coincide with Shabbat – like today.

On the other hand, this professor was right. He clearly observed that American Jews celebrate these festivals in large numbers, and Hanukkah is certainly one that most American Jews do celebrate.

But there is a loss here. By elevating Hanukkah, which does not have the deep levels of theological meaning that our other holidays have, we miss out on the higher religious plateaus that other festivals offer.

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So, if Hanukkah is going to be a major festival, which it already seems to be, we can't have it be just about electric menorahs!

As we know, Hanukkah's emphasis has changed over time. While the original Hanukkah was observed as a military victory, it was later reinterpreted by our rabbis as the story of a miracle involving the oil that burned for eight days.

In more recent times, the early Zionists went back to the original Hanukkah narrative as they were looking for a secular festival to align with their emphasis on a Judaism that did not center around God and one that accentuated the image of the Jew as strong, brave, and heroic – something they were trying to cultivate.

And what about for us today?

What deeper message can we discover within the Hanukkah lights?

To make something new, it's sometimes helpful to look at the old.

So, let me begin with a quote from the Talmud where Hanukkah is mentioned.

Now it is important to note that out of the 5894 pages in the Vilna Shas, the traditional printing of the Talmud from the end of the 18th century, only one page deals with Hanukkah.

And on that one page the Talmud teaches that the commandment to light the Hanukkah candles should be performed “between sunset and the time when feet disappear from the marketplace – *ad she'tikhleh regel min ha-shuk.*” (BT Shabbat 21B)

So what do we learn from this?

There are two teachings that we can elicit from this Talmudic statement.

First, we can learn that the *Hanukkiyah* has to be lit when it's dark, or almost dark, at sunset or shortly thereafter. There is an exception, however.

And when is that?

On Friday nights when we light it before lighting the Shabbat candles which are lit 18 minutes before sunset. At the end of Shabbat, we light it later, after three stars appear.

The second lesson is that we are supposed to light the *Hanukkiyah* to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *pirsumei nisa* – advertising the miracle. It has to be seen by other people. If it's the time after everyone has left the marketplace, then no one is in the streets, and no one will see your *Hanukkiyah* in your window. Therefore, it should not be too late in the evening.

It should be dark but not too dark. Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, the great 18th century rabbi and Hasidic leader, offered a wonderful teaching on Hanukkah based on this Talmudic principle, which Rabbi Green shared with me.

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak taught that miracles can be divided into three categories: revealed miracles, and two kinds of hidden miracles.

Revealed miracles are those that are so large and monumental that everyone can see them. He describes the miracles that took place during the Exodus. These miracles seemed to up-end the natural order, and everyone witnessed these miracles.

But then he goes on to teach that there are two kinds of hidden miracles. The first kind includes the festival of *Purim*, where God brings about things without any activity on the part of humans.

More about that on Purim; the rabbis understand that the Purim miracle was that God was working behind the scenes.

Another instance where we see that same kind of work is in this morning's Torah reading. We read of this unbelievable moment where Pharaoh needs someone's assistance to interpret the nightmares that are keeping him awake, and somehow it is Joseph who, through the fortuitous events/hidden miracles, is in the right place at the right time both to interpret his dreams and to come up with the solution that Pharaoh didn't even know he needed to save Egypt from famine.

And then there is another type of hidden miracle. In this type, the miraculous aspect is embedded in human action. In our tradition, the rabbis want to see the story of Hanukkah as being about hidden miracles – the battles that the Jews fought were being supported and sustained by God's miraculous efforts.

Some even today see modern events through the same lens and utilize the same language.

When Israel faced violence from an internal Arab population, in addition to the armies of the surrounding countries that attacked it in 1948 and was able to defeat all of those forces despite being outnumbered, many people utilized the same description: “it was a miracle.”

Historians would tell us that there were many factors at work that helped the Israelis defeat their enemies. But if you have read books like *O’ Jerusalem*, you know that the story was simply incredible. It was bravery, it was courage, it was strength, it was skill, and it was a fair amount of good fortune.

When all those things come together, we call it a miracle.

Returning to Rabbi Levi Yitzhak, he calls the great miracles “day” because they illuminate the world with so much light that it is like the sun. But hidden miracles are called “night,” since they happen in a much more quiet manner.

Thus we juxtapose the great miracle of day, which is the Exodus, with the miracle of night, which is Purim, and we are left with a third level – the hidden miracle where there is human participation – Hanukkah.

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak teaches that this is why, after the fall festival season, Hanukkah comes first and then Purim and then Pesah, since the Talmud also teaches on that same page that we go up in holiness and not down, which is how we light the *Hanukkiyah*, adding one candle each night, bringing more light into the world.

As he states, “We draw forth the lights and grace of Hanukkah, which are not so great, since this was a hidden miracle accomplished with human help... Then we rise up to Purim, a hidden miracle in which humans did not act... And then we rise again to the holy state when we can receive the great lights of Pesah, the revealed miracle that is seen by all...”

(*Kedushat Levi*, Hanukkah #5)

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak teaches that by appreciating the hidden miracles and the revealed miracles a person will come to see “that there is nothing ordinary about the way the world works.”

Now that’s an unbelievable teaching that illuminates my soul.

There are miracles all around us all the time. Think about a miraculous moment in your life. Maybe you were in an accident and were saved from harm. Maybe you witnessed a child being born into the world; maybe it was your own child. Maybe you were with someone at an incredible moment, even at a moment of pain, loss, illness, or even death, and know that there is something incredibly powerful about that.

Maybe you witnessed the simple everyday miracle of the sun rising and were so moved by that that it remains with you. There are miracles all around us – even on days when our hearts are broken by tragic loss...

We utilize the stories of Hanukkah, Purim, and Passover to have models of miracles, but there are miracles everywhere, all the time.

There **are** miracles in everything. We just have to open our eyes to them.

Albert Einstein said: “What I see in Nature is a magnificent structure that we can comprehend only very imperfectly, and that must fill a thinking person with a feeling of humility. This is a genuinely religious feeling that has nothing to do with mysticism.”

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Some feel that the more we understand about our universe, the more we are removed from God, but I experience exactly the opposite. The more I understand about the human body and biology and chemistry and physics, the more intricate it is - the more incredibly unbelievable it is.

Not unbelievable in that I don't believe it, but rather: it's so awe inspiring!

In our modern world, we have given over science and the beauty of nature in medicine and biology to other realms, but those realms used to be considered what we call today religion.

But we should reclaim the sacred story of evolution. Natural processes can be just as magical and miraculous as something else. We need to see the world as miraculous, as transcendent. As this unfolding of reality is occurring we begin to open our eyes to the miraculous.

As Rabbi Levi Yitzhak then states, “That is why the *mitzvah* [of lighting the Hanukkah candles] is to be performed ‘between sunset and the time when the feet (*regel*) disappear from the marketplace.’”

He then uses a little pun. *Regel* means legs. The Talmud is saying when ‘legs’ leave the marketplace, people are leaving the marketplace, but Rabbi Levi Yitzhak says that *regel* also connects to the word *ragil*, something that is common and ordinary.

We should contemplate the Hanukkah candles until we overcome our sense that the world that is all around us is *ragil*, is ordinary. As Rabbi Levi Yitzhak says:

“When you kindle Hanukkah lights, this thought disappears from you and the world is no longer ordinary...

“In this way you come to the faith that the hidden miracle is not merely natural, but that God is constantly recreating the world, in every hour and moment. Sometimes (He) [God] recreates the natural order set into motion in the six days of creation and sometimes (He) [God] changes something, like a revealed miracle. But once you accept that there are hidden miracles, you realize that all is constantly being recreated, even the established natural order...”

The world is constantly evolving and changing, whether it’s the position of every single electron or our own biology and DNA that evolves, or whether it’s looking at the world with new eyes. Nothing is the same. It is constantly changing and always miraculous.

Nothing ordinary about it.

Similarly, Einstein also taught: “There are two ways to live: you can live as if nothing is a miracle; you can live [as] if everything is a miracle.”

May we use the Hanukkah lights and miracles to find the miracles that all around us.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Hanukkah.