

# Thoughts on Chanukah

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## Celebrating Purim on Chanukah

***For this reason, the Sages of that generation established that these eight days that begin with the night of the 25<sup>th</sup> of Kislev are days of rejoicing and Hallel. And we light candles at night on them at the doors of houses – each night of the eight nights. These days are called Chanukah. And eulogies and fasting are prohibited on them as on the days of Purim. The lighting of candles on them is a mitzvah of the Sages like the reading of the Megilah [on Purim]. (Rambam Mishne Torah, Hilchot Chanukah 3:3)***

### I. Creating new commandments

In his code of Torah Law, the Mishne Torah, Rambam – Maimonides – combines the laws of Purim and Chanukah in a single section. Chanukah and Purim are the only two celebrations created by the Sages. Rambam emphasizes this shared origin in the above quotation. He explains that lighting the Chanukah candles is a *mitzvah* created by the Sages. Its origin is the same as the *mitzvah* to read the *Megilah* on Purim.

Their shared origin explains another aspect of Rambam's presentation. Chanukah precedes Purim on the calendar. *Shulchan Aruch* – the standard code of Torah law – discusses Chanukah before Purim. Rambam does not follow this order. He opens with a discussion of the *mitzvah* of *Megilah* and the celebration of Purim. After concluding that discussion, he introduces

Chanukah and its *mitzvot*. Why does Rambam choose this order?

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik Zt"l explains that the *mitzvah* of reading the *Megilah* on Purim provides the basis for the creation of Chanukah. Purim and reading the *Megilah* are unique innovations. The Torah authorizes the Sages to make decrees and to establish practices. However, these measures are designed to reinforce and support the Torah's *mitzvot*. Before the creation of Purim and *Megilah* reading, the Sages limited their legislation to protecting and promoting the Torah's six hundred thirteen *mitzvot*. They did not originate new *mitzvot*. In creating the commandment to read the *Megilah*, they broke new ground.

The Talmud asks from where the Sages derived the authority to create a new commandment. It concludes that the Sages based their decision on a valid precedent.<sup>1</sup> But this precedent does not detract from the uniqueness of *Megilah* reading and Purim. *Megilah* reading is a new *mitzvah* created by the Sages. It is not a decree instituted to reinforce or safeguard the observance of one of the Torah's six hundred thirteen *mitzvot*.

### II. Purim is a precedent

This innovation established the basis for Chanukah's *mitzvot* – lighting the Chanukah candles and reciting the *Hallel*. When the miracles of Chanukah occurred, the Sages did not need to consider whether they had the authority to create new *mitzvot* to recall and commemorate these

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<sup>1</sup> Mesechet Megilah 14a.

events. This issue was considered, weighed, and resolved by a previous generation of Sages who established Purim and *Megilah* reading. Chanukah is based on Purim. Therefore, Rambam first describes the *mitzvah* of *Megilah* reading and then the *mitzvot* of Chanukah.<sup>2</sup>

***All those who are obligated in reading the Megilah are obligated in lighting the Chanukah candles. (Rambam Mishne Torah, Hilchot Chanukah 3:4)***

### III. Another connection

The previous discussion explains Rambam's comparison of Chanukah to Purim. Chanukah is based on Purim. Rambam adds that those who are obligated in the *mitzvah* of *Megilah* reading are obligated in the *mitzvah* of the Chanukah candles. What message is he communicating? The popular response is that his intention is to include women in the obligation. Women are often exempt from positive commandments that must be performed at a fixed time. However, this exemption does not apply to the *mitzvah* of reading the *Megilah*. Women are obligated in this *mitzvah*. Rambam is explaining that women are obligated also to light the Chanukah candles.

This explanation is not adequate. It does not explain his phrasing. He should have said, "Women are obligated to light Chanukah candles." Why does he refer to Purim? The implication of his phrasing is that the obligation to light Chanukah candles is dependent upon and engendered by the obligation to read the *Megilah*. Therefore, one who is obligated in the *Megilah* is obligated in the Chanukah candles. He is explaining that men and women are obligated in the Chanukah candles because they are obligated in the *Megilah*. How

does the obligation to read the *Megilah* create the obligation to light the Chanukah candles?

### IV. A basic Torah principle

The answer is based on a far-reaching and very basic principle. When we give thanks to Hashem for a specific kindness or salvation, we do not limit our thanks to that event or phenomenon. We acknowledge individual acts of kindness as manifestations of Hashem's constant and pervasive kindness. We are prompted to give thanks by a specific kindness, but we extend our acknowledgment beyond this particular.

***Blessed are You, our L-rd, King of the universe, Who bestows good on the unworthy, Who has bestowed on me much good. (Birkat HaGomel)***<sup>3</sup>

### V. Illustrations of the principle

There are many illustrations of this principle. When a person encounters danger and is saved, one recites a blessing – *Birkat HaGomel*. The blessing is recited when one recovers from a serious illness. One recites it when escaping a dangerous accident. The text of the blessing is above. The blessing acknowledges Hashem has bestowed good on the unworthy. With this statement, the person expresses thanks for His kindness just received. Then, one adds that Hashem bestows much good. With this statement, the person acknowledges that Hashem's kindness is pervasive.

*Birkat HaMazon* – the grace recited after a meal – also illustrates this principle. The Torah commands us to offer thanks after eating. It requires that we thank Hashem for the food we have eaten and for granting us the Land of Israel. *Birkat HaMazon* is composed of four benedictions. In the first, we acknowledge that Hashem provides us with food

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<sup>2</sup> Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, 'Concerning the Relationship between the Chanukah Candles and the *Mitzvah* of *Megilah* Reading' *Mesorah*, Adar 5757, pp 14-15.

<sup>3</sup> Translation by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, Koren Siddur.

and sustains us. In the second benediction, we thank Him for the Land of Israel. However, this benediction then continues. We acknowledge that Hashem redeemed us from Egypt, entered with us into a covenant, gave us the Torah, and bestowed upon us other kindnesses. We conclude, "And for everything, Hashem, our L-rd we give You thanks." Eating a meal obligates us to give thanks to Hashem. But when we respond, we do not thank Him for just our food. We extend our thanksgiving to include other kindnesses.

#### VI. Chanukah complements Purim

This principle explains Rambam's phrasing. Who is obligated to light the Chanukah candles? Those obligated to read the *Megilah*. Rambam is explaining that when the Sages created Chanukah they did not rely on Purim as only a technical basis. With the creation of Purim, emerged an obligation to identify other similar events.<sup>4</sup> When we celebrate Chanukah, we are recognizing that the salvation commemorated by Purim was not a single, unique event. Hashem saved us many times. Chanukah commemorates one of these occasions. In other words, the observance of Chanukah complements our observance of Purim. Those obligated to read the *Megilah* must also light the Chanukah candles. Their observance of the Chanukah *mitzvah* enhances their observance of Purim.

#### VII. Recognizing our blessings

*Birkat HaGomel*, *Birkat HaMazon*, and Chanukah illustrate a single principle. When we give thanks to Hashem, we do not limit our thanks to a specific event or phenomenon. We expand our thanks to include other expressions of Hashem's kindness. Why is this important? Why must we extend our thanks beyond the specific? If we thank Hashem for only a specific kindness, then we treat that kindness as unique and extraordinary. We do not recognize that the specific is an expression of Hashem's constant and pervasive kindness. When we see only the specific, we do not recognize all our blessings. When we look beyond the specific and recognize all the kindnesses we received, we realize we are blessed every moment of every day.

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<sup>4</sup> The principal prayer added to the services on Purim is *Al HaNissim*. In it, we acknowledge that Hashem saved us from Haman. This prayer is added into the benediction of the *Amidah* in which we give thanks to Hashem for all He does for us. It is also added into the second blessing of *Birkat HaMazon*. This is the blessing cited above in which we thank Hashem for all His kindnesses. The reason *Al HaNissim* is added into these benedictions is that the benediction and *Al HaNissim* complement one another. When we recite *Al HaNissim*, it is appropriate for us to also acknowledge Hashem's other kindnesses. On Purim, when we recite the blessing of the *Amidah* and *Birkat HaMazon* and give thanks to Hashem, it is appropriate to recall the salvation commemorated on that day. We recite *Al HaNissim* also on Chanukah. We follow that same practice as on Purim for the same reasons.