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Thoughts on Chanukah 5775 December 12, 2014

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The Importance of the Theme and Message of Chanukah

During the Second Temple period when the Hellenist kings ruled, they made decrees against Israel and suppressed their religion. They did not permit them to study Torah and perform mitzvot. They seized their wealth and their daughters. They entered the Sanctuary, breached its walls, and defiled the objects of purity. Israel was greatly afflicted by them and terribly oppressed until the G-d of their fathers had mercy upon them and redeemed them from their hands and saved them. The Hashmoni family – the great Kohanim – arose and they killed them and saved Israel from their hand. They established a king from among the Kohanim and sovereignty returned to Israel for more than two hundred years until the destruction of the Second Temple. (Maimonides, Mishne Torah, Laws of Chanukah 3:1)

1. Chanukah and Purim were created by the Sages

With these comments, Maimonides introduces his discussion of the laws of Chanukah. He explains that during the Second Temple period, the Assyrian kings, became rulers over the Land of Israel. The Assyrians were Hellenists and attempted to introduce their culture into the Land of Israel. Their strategy included brutal suppression of the Jewish religion and merciless oppression of all who opposed their policies. Ultimately, the Hashmonaim – a prominent family of *Kohanim* – lead the people in an armed rebellion against their Assyrian rulers. Despite discouraging odds against their success, the rebels succeeded in driving the Assyrians out of Israel and Jewish sovereignty was reestablished.

Maimonides continues in the following paragraphs to describe the miracle that occurred in the Temple with the rekindling of the *Menorah* – the candelabra of the Sanctuary. He then explains that in response to the miraculous victory and the miracle of the *Menorah*, the Sages established the festival of Chanukah.

Chanukah is the second of the two festivals created by the Sages. It was preceded by the establishment of Purim. Maimonides discusses these two celebrations in a single section of his

code of Torah law – the *Mishne Torah*. He begins with a discussion of Purim and then continues with his discussion of Chanukah. His order contrasts with that of Rav Yosef Karo in his *Shulchan Aruch*. In *Shulchan Aruch*, the discussion of Chanukah precedes the discussion of Purim. Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik Zt”l explains that *Shulchan Aruch’s* order is dictated by the Jewish calendar. On our calendar, Chanukah precedes Purim. Accordingly, Chanukah precedes Purim in *Shulchan Aruch*. Rav Soloveitchik explains that Maimonides ignores this chronological consideration in order to focus upon a conceptual relationship between the two celebrations.

2. The controversy surrounding the innovation of Purim and Chanukah

The Talmud explains that the establishment by the Sages of a new celebration – one not included in the Torah – was a controversial innovation. The Sages were uncertain whether their authority included the power to create a new festival. Ultimately, after extensive discussion and debate, the Sages concluded that they were authorized to establish a new festival.¹ This debate took place during the period of the first Diaspora in regard to Purim. After the return to the Land of Israel – during the Second Temple period – the events commemorated by Chanukah occurred. This time there was no debate regarding the authority of the Sages to create a festival celebrating the salvation of the people. This debate had already taken place and the issue had been resolved. The Sages of this latter generation relied upon the ruling of their predecessors and created the celebration of Chanukah.

In short, Purim served as that precedent and halachic basis for the creation of Chanukah. This relationship is expressed by Maimonides in the order in which he discusses the two celebrations. He begins with Purim which established the authority of the Sages to create a new celebration and then continues with Chanukah which relies upon the Purim precedent.²

All of these mitzvot that they created, we are obligated to accept and observe them as it says, “You shall not deviate from any of the word...” They are not an addition to the mitzvot of the Torah or a violation of the admonition to not add or subtract (from the Torah that specifies) that a prophet is not permitted to innovate and claim that the Holy One Blessed Be He commanded him in this mitzvah or to add onto the mitzvot of the Torah or to subtract any one of these six hundred thirteen mitzvot.

Instead, if an assembly of Sages with a prophet of that time added a mitzvah by way of enactment, teaching, or decree, this is not an addition. This is because they have not said that the Holy One Blessed Be He commanded to make an eruv or to read the Megilah in its proper time ...

Rather we say as follows: The prophets with the assembly of Sages enacted and commanded to read the Megilah in its proper time in order to proclaim the praise of Hashem and the salvation that He brought about for us and that He responded when we called out. (The mitzvah was created) in order that we should bless Him and praise Him and in order to make known to future generations that the promise made to us in the Torah – “For who is the great nation whose G-d is close to it like Hashem our G-d at any time that we call out to Him?” – is true... (Maimonides, Mishne Torah, Introduction)

3. The message of Chanukah and Purim and its unique role in the enactment of these celebrations

In his introduction to his *Mishne Torah*, Maimonides provides a short list of the 613 *mitzvot*. This list is composed exclusively of commandments whose source is to be found in the Torah. In other words, all of these 613 commandments originate from Sinai. Maimonides continues with a brief discussion of the authority of the Sages to create new commandments. He acknowledges, that although the Torah admonishes us to not add or subtract to its commandments, the Sages have enacted various *mitzvot*. He then resolves this apparent paradox. He explains that the prohibition against adding to the Torah’s commandments is to be understood very literally. The Sages may not enact a new commandment and claim that it is ordained directly from Hashem. Any enactment of the Sages must be clearly acknowledged by them to be their own innovation and not a Divine decree. Therefore, the Sages acted within their authority when they created the *mitzvah* of reading the *Megilah* on Purim. They did not present their enactment as a Divinely ordained commandment. Instead, they established the commandment as an enactment of their own. No addition was made to the *mitzvot* revealed at Sinai.

Maimonides adds that the commandment of reading the *Megilah* was created in order to communicate an important concept. The events recounted in the *Megilah* demonstrate that Hashem responds to our petitions. He is the protector of the Jewish people and their redeemer. Presumably, the entire celebration of Purim is dedicated to the communication of this message. This also seems to be the central message of Chanukah. It is notable, that in this discussion, Maimonides does not stress our obligation to offer thanks. Instead, he suggests that the objective of the *Megilah’s* reading is to communicate Hashem’s providential relationship with the Jewish nation. In other words, although the celebration of Purim, the reading of the *Megilah*, and the celebration of Chanukah,

1 Mesechet Megilah 7a.

2 Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, Recorded Lecture on Purim.

certainly include a prominent element of thanksgiving, this element is not an ends unto itself. It is a means to the end of heightening our awareness of Hashem's relationship to our people.

In this sense, the celebrations of Purim and Chanukah are anomalies. Most decrees and commandments enacted by the Sages reinforce or relate to a specific commandment of the Torah. The Sages prohibited combinations of poultry and milk. This decree reinforces the Torah's prohibitions against cooking meat and milk together and consuming cooked combinations of meat and milk. Similar relationships can be identified between other enactments of the Sages and specific *mitzvot* in the Torah. In contrast, the celebrations of Chanukah and Purim do not reinforce specific Torah commandments. Instead, they are designed to focus our attention upon the Torah's perspective regarding Hashem's providential relationship with His people.

The twelfth foundation: (This is) the Messianic Era. It is that we should believe and affirm that he will come and not think that he will be late. If he is delayed, one should await him and not assign for him a time and not speculate regarding passages of the Torah in order to derive the time for his coming... (Maimonides, Commentary on the Mishne, Tractate Sanhedrin 10:1)

4. The controversy regarding treating the Messianic era as a fundamental Torah doctrine

One of Maimonides most notable and controversial innovations was his enumeration of thirteen basic theological foundations of the Torah. His insistence upon the essential role of these doctrines and the specific doctrines that he selected for inclusion in his list, have been criticized from virtually the time Maimonides recorded his position and up to modern times. One of Maimonides' most vigorous critics is Rabbaynu Yosef Albo. Albo dedicated an entire work to his polemic against Maimonides. One of his most revealing criticisms relates to Maimonides' twelfth foundation – belief in the eventual advent of a Messianic era. In his *Mishne Torah*, Maimonides describes the Torah's concept of the Messianic era. Essentially, it is an era in which the oppression of the Jewish people will come to a conclusive and permanent end. Torah observance will be embraced. Humanity will enter into an era of continual peace and prosperity.³

Albo's criticism is not focused upon Maimonides conception of the Messianic era. Neither does he challenge Maimonides' assertion that the Torah includes within its doctrines a declaration regarding the certainty of the future advent of the Messianic era. His criticism is that Maimonides insists that this doctrine is fundamental to the Torah. Albo argues that the doctrine is far from one the Torah's most essential elements.⁴ Apparently, Albo's position is that this doctrine has no significance relevance to Torah observance and practice. Where a person to completely reject the doctrine, his observance of the Torah would not be significantly impacted. Yet, Maimonides regards one who rejects this doctrine as a heretic. In other words, although Albo accepts Maimonides' assertion that the Torah includes fundamental doctrines, he rejects the inclusion of this doctrine among them.

Albo's criticism provides an important insight into his perspective on the definition of "fundamental" in the context of Torah doctrines. According to Albo, a fundamental doctrine should function as a foundation upon which the entire religion is dependant. Any ancillary doctrine cannot be regarded as fundamental. The doctrine of a Messianic era has little, if any, impact upon the observance and practices of the Torah. Hence, it cannot be regarded as foundational. What is Maimonides' position?

The tenth foundation: Hashem is cognizant of the action of human beings and does not close His eye from them ... (Maimonides, Commentary on the Mishne, Tractate Sanhedrin 10:1)

5. The centrality of doctrines to the Torah

As noted above, Maimonides maintains that the celebrations of Purim and Chanukah were created in order to communicate a message regarding Divine providence. In this function, these commandments differ from other enactments of our Sages. In general, decrees and enactments were created by the Sages to reinforce specific commandments of the Torah. This suggests a question: Why did the Sages deem it necessary to enact celebrations that remind us of this specific idea?

It is notable that Maimonides includes the idea of Hashem's providence in his list of fundamental doctrines. His tenth foundation is that Hashem is cognizant of human affairs and is involved in our world. Maimonides' 10th and 12th foundations deal with two aspects of the Torah's understanding of providence. The 10th principle asserts that providence exists. The 12th focuses specifically upon the providential relationship between Hashem and the Jewish people. The assertion of the certainty of a Messianic era

³ Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Melachim, chapters 11-12.

⁴ Rav Yosef Albo, *Sefer Halkkarim*, volume1, chapter 4.

communicates, that although there may be detours and setbacks in the journey of the Jewish people towards its destiny, there is a divine plan that shall be ultimately realized.

The message communicated by Purim and Chanukah is an elemental component of our concept of providence in general and specifically of the destiny of the Jewish people. Therefore, the Sages sought to reinforce our conviction in providence through these celebrations.

The different perspectives of Albo and Maimonides are evidenced in Maimonides' treatment of Purim and Chanukah. Albo regards as fundamental those doctrines that underlie our observance of the Torah and that find expression in our practices. Other doctrines he regards as ancillary and not deserving to be regarded as fundamental doctrines. For Albo, the Torah is not primarily a system of beliefs or convictions. It is a system of practice. The centrality of a doctrine is measured by its impact upon practice.

Maimonides rejects this perspective. For Maimonides, doctrines deserve to be judged intrinsically. The centrality of a doctrine is determined by the Torah's emphasis of the doctrine, not by its impact upon practice. In his treatment of Chanukah and Purim, Maimonides asserts that the celebrations were created by the Sages in order to communicate and reinforce important doctrines. This suggests to Maimonides that doctrines are intrinsically significant and not only foundations for practice.

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-Rabbi Bernie Fox and NYHS

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