

Thoughts on Chanukah

Rabbi Bernie Fox

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How Many Latkes are too Many?¹

The mitzvah is to place it (the Chanukah lights) in the tephach next to the door opening on the left side. This is in order that the mezuzah should be on the right side and the Chanukah lights on the left side. (Shulchan Aruch, Orech Chayim 671:7)

I. The Chanukah lights are associated with the home

Chanukah is celebrated through the daily recitation of *Hallel* and the insertion of the *Al HaNisim* prayer into the *Amidah* and into *Birkat HaMazon*. It is also prohibited to fast on Chanukah and eulogies are not delivered. However, the practice most closely identified with the celebration of Chanukah is the lighting of the Chanukah lights. This practice is performed every night. The first night of Chanukah a single light is kindled and an additional light is added each subsequent night until on the final night eight lights are lit.

According to Talmud, the Chanukah lights are placed in the doorway of the home or at the entrance to its courtyard. If such a public demonstration might provoke an anti-Semitic response, then it is permitted to place the candles within the home. Outside of the Land of Israel this practice has been adopted as the standard even in countries and at times in which Jews are not harassed.

It is clear from the discussions in the Talmud that the Chanukah lights are associated with one's

home. However, Shulchan Aruch notes the custom to also light Chanukah candles in the synagogue and to recite the blessings associated with the *mitzvah*.² What is the purpose or objective of this custom?

II. The Chanukah lights not only recall the miracles, they communicate them

Shulchan Aruch explains that the objective of the custom is to publicize the miracle of Chanukah.³ This comment requires further explanation. The *mitzvah* of the Chanukah lights was designed by the Sages to recall the miracle of Chanukah. Our ancestors were victorious over their persecutors – the Assyrian Hellenists. With their victory, they were rescued from persecution at the hands of the Assyrians; they regained their religious freedom and restored the service in the Temple that had been suspended by the Assyrians. The providential element of their victory achieved full expression through the miracle of the oil. Upon regaining control of the *Bait HaMikdash* – the Sacred Temple, they discovered only a single container of olive oil suitable for use in the *menorah* of the Temple. This container's oil was sufficient to fuel the *menorah* for a single night. Nonetheless, it sufficed to fuel the *Bait HaMikdash's menorah* for a full eight nights – the period required to secure a new supply of olive oil. All of these events are recalled through our practice of kindling the Chanukah lights.

However, our practice is not merely designed to recall the ancient miracle to the person performing the *mitzvah*. It is intended and it is designed to publicize these events to others. For

¹ Reprinted from Thoughts 5773.

² Rav Yosef Karo, *Shulchan Aruch, Orech Chayim 671:7*.

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this reason the *menorah* is ideally placed at the doorway of the home or at the entrance to its courtyard. It is to be visible to those passing by on the street. The Chanukah lights are to be lit at the beginning of the evening and to burn for a half hour. The Talmud explains that this is because at this time people are returning to their homes at end of their workday. On their way home they pass through the streets. Lighting at this time maximizes the number of people who will see the Chanukah lights.

Our practice outside of the Land of Israel is to light the Chanukah candles inside of our homes. This practice does not abandon the objective of communicating or publicizing the ancient miracles. It merely redirects the message from the passersby in the street to the members of our household. We communicate the message of the Chanukah candles to the members of the household rather than to the people passing by on the street.

III. The reason Chanukah lights are kindled in the synagogue

Now, the comments of Shulchan Aruch can be more clearly understood. This explanation of the purpose of the *mitzvah* of the Chanukah lights explains our practice of lighting the Chanukah candles in the synagogue. At the end of each day, members of the community gather in the synagogue to recite the afternoon *minchah* service and evening *aravit* or *maariv* service. The Chanukah lights are kindled between these two services. Because the intention of the Chanukah lights is not only to recall the miracles but also to communicate them, it is appropriate that this daily gathering within the community include the kindling of the Chanukah lights. The gathering provides a daily opportunity for the communication of the Chanukah candles' message to an assembly of the community.

In short, the custom of kindling the Chanukah lights in the synagogue reflects the basic intent of the commandment. It is not merely intended to remind the individual lighting the candles of

the miracles of Chanukah. It is intended as a demonstration to others. It is intended to publicize the miracles.

You delivered the mighty into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the defiled into the hands of the clean, the wicked into the hands of the righteous, the arrogant into the hands of those who study the Torah. For Yourself, You made Your name great and sanctified in Your world. For Your nation, You performed a great salvation and redemption as on this day. (Al HaNissim prayer)

IV. What precisely is Chanukah's message?

What is the precise message that the Chanukah lights are intended to publicize? As noted above, on Chanukah we insert the *Al HaNisim* prayer into the *Amidah* and *Birkat HaMazon*. This prayer is not a supplication. Rather, it is a thanksgiving prayer. It describes the victory of our ancestors over their adversaries. The above quotation from *Al HaNisim* consists of five characterizations of the victory. The first two characterizations are obviously appropriate. The few overcame the many and the weak triumphed over the mighty. These two characterizations focus upon the magnitude of the miracle in our ancestors' victory. Although outnumbered and weaker than their adversaries, they triumphed. Their victory can only be understood as an act of providence. However, the final three characterizations are more difficult to understand. They all describe the victory as a moral or religious triumph – as the triumph of good over evil. Why are these final three characterizations included in the *Al HaNisim*? *Al HaNisim* is a prayer that expresses thanksgiving for our victory over our persecutors. What dimension is added to this thanksgiving by characterizing it as a triumph of good over evil?

The answer to this question is provided in the very next two sentences of the *Al HaNisim*. We explain that our ancestors' triumph had two impacts. It brought them salvation from

persecution. Also, it sanctified Hashem's name in the world. The triumph of the Jewish nation over their mighty adversaries was understood as an expression of providence. This was enhanced by the moral dimension of the victory. Good overcame evil. Those committed to the service of Hashem defeated those who would erase His service. Through our victory, Hashem revealed Himself to the nations of the region.

In other words, the victory had a material and spiritual dimension. Its material dimension was that it provided salvation to the weak and persecuted. Its spiritual dimension was that the righteous servants of Hashem vanquished their evil adversaries who wished to uproot our service to Him. Through this victory we were saved from material persecution and His name was exalted and glorified in the world.

V. Publicize to whom?

Now, another odd aspect of the Chanukah lights can be explained. Ideally, the Chanukah lights are kindled in the doorways and gates of our homes and courtyards. Through placing the Chanukah lights at these locations, the miracles of Chanukah are communicated to all passersby. Apparently, the intention is to communicate the message of the Chanukah lights to all passersby – without distinction between Jew and non-Jew. If this is the case, then the *mitzvah* of the Chanukah lights is unique. It is intended to communicate its message not only to the Jewish people but also to our non-Jewish neighbors. Why is this *mitzvah's* message directed to Jew and non-Jew alike?

Perhaps, the answer is that – as the *Al HaNissim* explains – that the miracles of Chanukah sanctified Hashem's name in His world. His name was sanctified among the Jewish people and among the nations of the region. Because the miracles of Chanukah communicated their message to humanity without distinction between Jew and non-Jew, our communication of these miracles is ideally directed to all people – Jews and non-Jews.

VI. Too many latkes?

The *Al HaNissim* describes the salvation of the Jewish people in a material and spiritual dimension. Our victory was intended to demonstrate the triumph of good over evil or of Torah over those who would uproot and destroy it. Ironically, the popular celebration of Chanukah has lost much of its spiritual element. The exchange of gifts, our indulgence in the delicious foods associated with the festival, family and community gatherings, all contribute to the joy and festivity of Chanukah. However, these activities can overshadow the fundamental spiritual element of the occasion. *Al HaNissim* provides us with an important prompt. It urges us to consider the spiritual dimension of the festival. It implores us to consider how we may advance our own and our community's spiritual missions. It communicates to us that material salvation only achieves its full meaning when it is the catalyst for spiritual growth.

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