

Thoughts on Chanukah

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Learning from the Siddur

On the miracles, redemption, the acts of omnipotence, salvations, and wars that You performed for our ancestors on those days, at this time. (Opening of Al HaNissim prayer)

I. The Siddur's two functions

The Siddur is our prayer book. It contains the texts of our prayers. These texts were developed and organized by the Members of the Great Assembly¹ and other great Sages in subsequent generations. Through reading its text, we execute our obligation to pray. Without the Siddur and its contents, we would be left to formulate our prayers according to our best judgment. When one considers the contents of the Siddur – its organization and its formulations of our prayers – one recognizes how inadequate would be our prayers without the Siddur.

Rav Joseph Dov Soloveitchik Zt"l explained that the Siddur is also a text for study. We should not recite its prayers and put it aside. Its contents deserve our careful consideration. In its prayers are many important insights.

On two occasions we recite the prayer *Al HaNissim*. On Purim and throughout the eight days of Chanukah *Al HaNissim* is inserted into the *Amidah* and *Birkat HaMazon*. The *Amidah* is the central component of every prayer service. *Birkat HaMazon* is the blessing recited after eating a

meal. The opening sentence of *Al HaNissim* is the same on all occasions. In it, we thank Hashem for our salvation and the miracles He performed for us. The remainder of the prayer is specific to Purim and Chanukah.

The Purim *Al HaNissim* is very brief. The Chanukah version is much longer. What is the reason for this difference? Both versions follow the same outline. Each begins by describing the threat to the Jewish people recalled on the occasion. This is followed by a description of our deliverance from this peril. In the Purim *Al HaNissim*, this is expressed in a concise text. Haman sought to destroy us, and Hashem defeated him. He and his sons were hanged.

You took up their conflict. You executed judgment on their behalf. You took vengeance on their behalf. You handed over the mighty into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the defiled into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous, the belligerent into the hands of those who study Your Torah. (Chanukah Al HaNissim prayer)

II. The elements of the Chanukah *Al HaNissim*

The Chanukah version describes both the threat and the deliverance in much greater detail. What is this additional material? It includes four elements. First, the conflict and threat are described in more detail. The Purim *Al HaNissim* describes Haman's genocidal plan. The Chanukah *Al HaNissim* describes the Hellenist efforts to

¹ The Members of the Great Assembly – the *Anshei Kenneset HaGadol* – included the last of the prophets and Mordechai and Ezra.

alienate us from the Torah and its observance. It provides detail. They wished to end our observance of the Torah's laws and to remove the Torah from our collective memory.

Second, it describes the war waged against the Hellenists as a conflict in two paradigms. It describes the battle and triumph in the paradigm of superior and inferior forces. We say, "You handed over the mighty into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few." Also, it describes the battle and triumph in the paradigm of good and evil. We say, "[You handed over] the defiled into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous, the belligerent into the hands of those who study Your Torah."

Third, the Chanukah version does not conclude with the destruction of our persecutors. It describes our victory as a *kiddush Hashem* – a sanctification of the Divine Name. Then, it describes the direct consequences of the victory – the rededication of the *Bait HaMikdash* – the Sacred Temple.

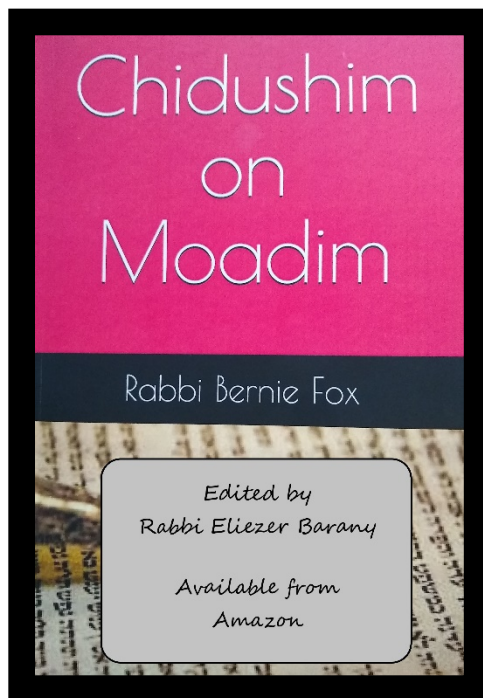
Fourth and finally, the prayer concludes by describing the establishment of the celebration of Chanukah.

This analysis of *Al HaNissim* reveals that the two versions are very different. The Purim version is a succinct description of peril and redemption. The Chanukah version describes these in more detail, from various perspectives, and adds a completely new component. It describes the creation of the Chanukah celebration. Why does Chanukah receive so much more attention than Purim?

And You made for Yourself a great and sacred name in Your world. (Chanukah Al HaNissim prayer)

III. The sanctification of Hashem's name

Haman's plan is described as an existential threat to the Jewish people. He intended to launch an extensive program of genocide and to pursue the Jews to extinction. The description does not include mention of conflict over religion or values.



In truth, religious issues were pivotal to the conflict. Haman determined that Mordechai and the Jews would continually mock his illusions of near-godlike greatness. They would not bow to him or submit to

the complete subservience of a mortal ruler. Also, he appealed to Achashverosh's insecurities by suggesting that the Jews' Torah observance conflicted with their loyalty to their Persian king. However, these religious issues were not the focus of the struggle. The threat was to the very existence of the Jewish people. The salvation of the Jews was deliverance from extinction.

The conflict with the Hellenists was very evidently religious. The Hellenists did not wish to destroy the Jewish people. Their objective was to assimilate the Jews. They intended to replace the Torah with Hellenism. The difference between the two conflicts is captured in the above sentence. The triumph of Chanukah was a *kiddush Hashem*; it sanctified Hashem's name. The Purim *Al HaNissim* does not make this assertion. That conflict was not

overtly over religious issues. It was a struggle for existence.

This is the fundamental difference between these two salvations. It is the source of the differences in the two versions of *Al HaNissim* and in the celebrations of Purim and Chanukah. Purim celebrates the miracle of our salvation. This difference is emphasized in the description of the threat. The Purim *Al HaNissim* describes a threat to the existence of the Jewish people. The Chanukah *Al HaNissim* describes a spiritual peril – the program of the Hellenists to undermine our commitment to the Torah.

And after this, your children came into the most sacred precinct of Your House and emptied Your Temple [of abominations] and purified Your Sanctuary... (Chanukah Al HaNissim prayer)

IV. A triumph of good over evil

This distinction is next expressed in the descriptions of the victory and salvation. The Purim *Al HaNissim* very concisely states that Haman's designs were undermined, and he and his sons were executed. This description is an acknowledgment and an offering of thanksgiving for our salvation. In contrast, the Chanukah *Al HaNissim* elaborates and employs two paradigms – the triumph of good over evil, and the inferior force over its more formidable opponent. This is because the victory sanctified Hashem's name in both these respects. His omnipotence was evidenced in the defeat of the mighty by the weak and outnumbered Jews. His providence was evidenced through good vanquishing evil. Hashem, in His glory, revealed Himself.

After declaring our Chanukah salvation and victory as a *kiddush Hashem*, *Al HaNissim* describes the rededication of the Sacred Temple. This was an essential element of the *kiddush Hashem*. The rededication of the *Bait HaMikdash* completed this triumph of good over evil. One would not describe

the Jew's victory as a triumph of Torah without the restoration of the Temple and its services.

And they established these eight days of Chanukah to give thanks and praise to Your great name. (Chanukah Al HaNissim prayer)

V. The *kiddush Hashem* continues

The Chanukah *Al HaNissim* concludes with the establishment of Chanukah as a celebration for future generations, and as a time for giving thanks and praise to Hashem. The Purim *Al HaNissim* does not include a parallel closing. It does not mention the creation of the Purim celebration. Why does the Chanukah *Al HaNissim* include this final element?

This too, was part of the *kiddush Hashem*. To understand this, another question must be considered. How long does a *kiddush Hashem* last? When an event that is a *kiddush Hashem* occurs, as the Jews' defeat of the Hellenists, how long does that event continue to sanctify and give glory to Hashem? The answer is that the *kiddush Hashem* continues every time the event is recalled. The event was the manifestation of eternal truths. Hashem's providence was expressed in our miraculous victory over those who would uproot our Torah. When we recall the victory, we reaffirm these truths. The celebration of Chanukah which recalls these events contributes to the *kiddush Hashem*.

VI. Comparing Purim and Chanukah

The two *Al HaNissim* prayers express the fundamental difference between Purim and Chanukah. Purim recalls our deliverance from complete extermination. It is a day on which we recall our rescue. Through reading the Megilah we identify the hidden hand of Hashem in our deliverance. Through the Megilah we also express thanks. The Purim *Al HaNissim* is focused on these two elements. It describes our rescue from

looming destruction, and it is an expression of thanks.

Chanukah also includes these elements. But Chanukah recalls events that were a *kiddush Hashem*. Our observance of Chanukah contributes to that *kiddush Hashem*. When we observe Chanukah, we are giving thanks to Hashem for our salvation and we offer Him our praise. Through commemorating it, we contribute to and sustain that *kiddush Hashem*. Through our observance, we renew the *kiddush Hashem* each year and in each generation.

Banner art: Cave of the Patriarchs, Hebron, Israel

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