

Thoughts on the Chanukah

Chanukah 5783, a Collection

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Too Many Latkes (5776)

*During the Second Temple, when the Hellenists ruled, they made decrees against Israel and suppressed their religion. They did not allow them to study Torah and perform the mitzvot. They seized their wealth and their daughters. They entered the Sanctuary, made many breaches in it, and defiled that which was sanctified. Israel was greatly afflicted by them, and they terribly oppressed them (the Jews). But then the G-d of our fathers had compassion for them and rescued them from their hands, and He saved them. The members of the Hashmonai family – high priests – overcame them. They killed them and rescued Israel from their hands. They established a king from among the priests, and sovereignty was restored to Israel for more than two hundred years – until the destruction of the second Temple.
(Maimonides, Mishne Torah, Laws of Chanukah 3:1)*

I. An historical prologue to the laws of Chanukah

In the opening paragraph of his discussion of the laws of Chanukah, Maimonides provides an account of the historical background of the festival. He describes the oppression of the Jews by the Hellenist rulers of the Land of Israel. He explains that Hashem rescued His people through the leadership of the Hashmonai family of priests. The Hellenists were defeated. Jewish sovereignty was restored for over two hundred years.

These introductory remarks are unusual. Maimonides composed his Mishne Torah as a code of law. He deals with every area of Torah practice with thoroughness and precision. He does not digress into a discussion of our history. Why does he introduce his treatment of the laws of Chanukah with an overview of the festival's history?

For that reason, the Sages of that generation prescribed that these eight days that begin from the night of the twenty-fifth of Kislev should be days of celebration and Hallel. We should kindle on them candles in the evening at the doors of the homes – each night of the eight nights. [This is] to demonstrate and reveal the miracle. These days are called Chanukah..... (Maimonides, Mishne Torah, Laws of Chanukah 3:3)

II. Recalling and pronouncing the events of Chanukah

Chanukah is primarily observed through two practices. We recite Hallel daily. Each night we kindle the Chanukah lights. Maimonides explains that we kindle the lights in order to recall and draw attention to the miracles that the festival commemorates. In other words, the *mitzvah* of kindling the lights is performed in its entirety when it stimulates us to recall the miracles of Chanukah.

III. Reciting *HaNerot Halalu*

This explains our practice of reciting *HaNerot Halalu* after kindling the lights. This short paragraph's origins can be traced to the immediate post-Talmud period.¹ It includes a brief historical explanation of the practice of

¹ Mesechet Sofrim 20:6.



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kindling the lights. We proclaim that we are kindling the lights in order to recall the miracles commemorated by the festival. The very nature of our practice of kindling the lights explains the inclusion of this paragraph in the procedure for the *mitzvah*. The *mitzvah* is fulfilled in its entirety only when the lights evoke our memory of the miracles that the festival commemorates. With this paragraph, we give verbal expression to our recollection of those events.²

We can now begin to understand Maimonides' motivation for including, in his presentation of the laws of Chanukah, a review of the festival's historical background. This information does not merely provide the reason for the Sages' creation of the festival and its observances. It is actually a fundamental element of one of the observances. The kindling of the lights must evoke our memory of the miracles commemorated by the festival and proclaim them to observers of the lights. In other words, in this instance, the history is not only relevant to the halachic practice; it is part of that practice.

IV. The shared character of Chanukah and Purim

A problem remains. Purim and Chanukah are very similar in their objectives. On Purim, we recall that Hashem saved us from the hands of Haman, who sought to destroy the Jewish people. On Chanukah, our observances are designed to recall and proclaim the miracle of our salvation from the Hellenists. Both are designed to recall occasions of miraculous salvation.

However, Maimonides does not include in his discussion of the laws of Purim a historical prologue. This background is fundamental to the halachic observance of Purim, just as it is to the observance of Chanukah. Yet, Maimonides does not find it necessary to include in his treatment of

the laws of Purim a discussion of its historical background!

V. A fundamental difference between Chanukah and Purim

The answer to this question may be obvious. The central observances of Purim and Chanukah are designed to recall and proclaim salvations and miracles. However, the practices employed to achieve this objective are fundamentally different. On Purim we read the Megilah. The Megilah tells the story of Purim. One only needs to perform the festival's central commandment to accomplish its aim. In performing the *mitzvah* of reading the Megilah the festival's historical background is recalled and proclaimed.

On Chanukah, we kindle the lights. This practice only evokes a memory of the events the festival commemorates if one is aware of them. Therefore, Maimonides must make us aware of them if we are to fulfill the festival's central commandment fully.

VI. The comprehensive nature of Maimonides's Mishne Torah

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik *Zt"l* suggested another explanation for Maimonides' special treatment of the historical background of Chanukah. Rav Soloveitchik – The Rav – bases his explanation on Maimonides' own comments in his introduction to his code of law – Mishne Torah. Maimonides explains that his code is a comprehensive compilation of the laws of the Torah. He explains that his work, combined with the books of TaNaCh, provides a complete presentation of the Written and Oral Laws. He adds that one who masters these works has mastered the entirety of the Torah without the need to make reference to any other work.

² According to Rav Soloveitchik, we recite the blessing of *She'asah nisim* before kindling the Chanukah lights for this same reason.



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The historical background of Purim is included in TaNaCh. It is the subject of Megilat Esther. TaNaCh does not include an account of the events commemorated by Chanukah. Because it is not included in TaNaCh, Maimonides includes this material in his Mishne Torah. This inclusion is consistent with his objective of creating a comprehensive presentation of the Torah. All essential elements must be included in either TaNaCh or his Mishne Torah. Whatever is not found in TaNaCh and is essential must be incorporated into Mishne Torah.³

VII. Two centuries of sovereignty

Now that we understand Maimonides' considerations in including a historical prologue to his treatment of the laws of Chanukah let us more carefully consider the content of this presentation. One of its elements seems out of place or superfluous. Maimonides' intention is to describe the oppression of the Jewish people by the Hellenists and their liberation from oppression. However, in addition to his description of these events, he adds that the Hashmonai family – who were priests – appointed a king from their family and restored sovereignty to the Jewish people for more than two hundred years. Why is this information relevant to Maimonides' presentation?

VIII. The Hashmonai family controversy

In order to respond to this question, another issue must be considered. Maimonides seems to consider the establishment of the Hashmonai family dynasty of kings as a positive development. Nachmanides disputes this position. He comments that the members of the Hashmonai family did not have the right to elevate themselves to the position of kings. He explains that once Hashem chose David as king, the institution of kingship was awarded to him and

his descendants in perpetuity. In assuming the kingship, the Hashmonai family was a usurper. Nachmanides argues that they were severely punished for this trespass.⁴ Maimonides apparently maintains that the Hashmonai family kings did not usurp the role of the house of David. Kingship will ultimately return to the family of David, but it is not inappropriate to appoint a king from another family or *shevet*, if necessary. The Torah instructs us only that the kingship cannot be permanently transferred to another family.⁵ In short, according to Maimonides, the Hashmonai family did not violate the Torah's laws through their ascension to the throne. According to Nachmanides, they were not entitled to serve as rulers. Only the descendants of David may rule the Jewish people.

From Nachmanides' perspective, the events commemorated by Chanukah are not completely positive. The Jewish people were saved from their oppressors. The Temple was restored. But the political outcome of the conflict was that a usurper seized the throne of Israel. The Hashmonai family presumed to be rulers of the Jewish people. We celebrate our salvation and deliverance from oppression. But these same events led to the emergence of an unfortunate political reality. A king who was not a descendant of David seized the throne.

Maimonides regards the ascension of the Hashmonai family to kingship as positive. He does not regard them as usurpers. They merely served as regents in the absence of an appropriate king from the descendants of David. Why does Maimonides note that sovereignty was restored to Israel after over two centuries? He apparently maintains that these two centuries of sovereignty somehow confirm his position! How does an extended period of sovereignty support his view?

³ Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, *Harerai Kedem* vol 1 p 271.

⁴ Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), *Commentary on Sefer Beresheit* 49:10.

⁵ Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Melachim 1:7-9.



IX. History as a teacher

The Rav suggests that sometimes the unfolding of subsequent events indicates whether a decision was proper and correct.⁶ His underlying assumption is that the response of providence communicates to us whether our ancestors or we acted properly. Proper and appropriate decisions are rewarded by positive outcomes. Poor or inappropriate decisions are not rewarded with success. Based on this theory, the Rav contends that we can determine whether an issue was properly decided by discerning the response of providence. If a controversial decision proves to be effective, then history is indicating that the decision was proper.

The Rav's view seems to be reflected in the comments of Maimonides. Maimonides fully recognizes that the decision of the Hashmonai family to serve as kings is subject to criticism. He understands that other authorities will contest his position that the Hashmonai family acted properly. In response to critics, he notes that these kings initiated over two centuries of sovereignty. He is indicating that history seems to support his position. In other words, the success that resulted from the ascension of the Chashmonai family to kingship communicates that Hashem approved their decision.

What Are We Celebrating? (5762)

What is Chanukah? Our Sages taught: On the twenty-fifth of Kislev, Chanukah is observed. This is for eight days, on which it is prohibited to eulogize or fast. For when the Hellenists entered the Temple, they defiled all of the oil. And when the Hashmonaim rose to power and overcame them, they only found one container of oil sealed with the seal of the Kohen Gadol. It only contained

sufficient oil for one day. But a miracle was performed with this oil, and they lit from it for eight days. In a different year, they established and made these days a festival with Hallel and giving thanks. (Tractate Shabbat 21b)

The Talmud explains that the celebration of Chanukah recalls the miracle of the oil. The Hashmonaim defeated the Assyrians and reoccupied the *Bait HaMikdash*. They wished to rekindle the *Menorah* – the candelabra – of the Temple. They required ritually pure oil. The Assyrians had defiled the oil in the Temple. The Hashmonaim found only a small container of oil that remained fit. It held sufficient oil to fuel the *Menorah* for a single night. They would require eight days to procure additional oil. A miracle occurred, and the small container of oil provided sufficient fuel for all eight nights.

The Talmud explains that the days on which this miracle occurred were established as a holiday. The festival is celebrated through reciting *Hallel* and offering thanks to Hashem. How do we offer thanks? One way is by adding the prayer of *Al HaNissim* to the *Birkat HaMazon* and the *Amidah*.⁷

It is clear, from the discussion in the Talmud, that the miracle of the *Menorah* is the central event commemorated by Chanukah. We would expect that *Al HaNissim* would thank the Almighty for this miracle. However, a review of *Al HaNissim* reveals that the miracle of the *Menorah* is not even mentioned. Instead, the prayer deals exclusively with the salvation of the Jewish people from their enemies. The Talmud indicates that this prayer is a fundamental aspect of the celebration of Chanukah. Why does this prayer not mention the central miracle?

Furthermore, the comments of the Talmud are difficult to understand. It is true that the burning of the oil for eight nights was a miracle.

⁶ Rav Tzvi Schachter, Recorded lecture.

⁷ Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), *Commentary on the Talmud*, Mesechet Shabbat 21b.



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However, far greater miracles are recorded in T'NaCH. These more impressive wonders are not commemorated through any celebration. For example, Yehoshua split the Jordan, he stopped the sun in its passage through the sky, and he brought down the walls of Yericho with a *shofar* blast. None of these awesome wonders are commemorated through their own celebration. The miracle of the oil is quite modest compared to these other events. Why is this miracle commemorated with its own holiday and not these other wonders?

Chanukah is one of two holidays established by the Sages of the Talmud. Before creating the celebration of Chanukah, the Sages instituted Purim. Maimonides discusses the reason the Sages established Purim. He explains that the Torah assures us that the Almighty will never forsake His people. In times of suffering, Hashem will redeem us. The events of Purim provide testimony to the truth of this promise.⁸

In discussing Chanukah, Maimonides mentions the miracle of the oil. However, he also stresses our salvation, through Hashem, from our enemies. Maimonides is explaining an important concept. The celebrations of Purim and Chanukah share a common theme. The Almighty will never allow the Jewish people to be destroyed. Both celebrations reinforce this covenant. Both recall episodes from our history. In each incident, Bnai Yisrael's existence was in peril. The Almighty intervened to save us. Both reinforce the reality of the Torah's promise.

We can now begin to answer our questions. Every miracle is not the occasion for the establishment of a holiday. The celebrations of Purim and Chanukah do not commemorate miracles. They testify to the truth of the Almighty's promise that He will never abandon His people. Other miracles of greater magnitude

are not commemorated by holidays. This is because these miracles did not involve the salvation of the Jewish people.

We can now understand the *Al HaNissim* prayer. This prayer captures the essential theme of Chanukah. It discusses the rescue of the Jewish people from their oppressors. This prayer is also recited on Purim. This is appropriate. Purim also communicates the same theme of salvation.

We must still explain the comments of the Talmud. The Talmud relates the celebration of Chanukah to the miracle of the *Menorah*. Maimonides also acknowledges the fundamental role of this miracle. This miracle is not an appropriate reason for creating a holiday!

Let us return to Purim. How do we know that the Almighty was the cause of our salvation? Perhaps, events just unfolded, by chance, in a manner that saved the Jews from Haman! The answer is found in Megilat Esther. The Megilah provides us with insight into the events. It reveals Hashem's manipulation of them and based on it, we know that our salvation was through the Almighty. This revelation was fundamental to the creation of Purim. Only a rescue clearly engineered by Hashem confirms the promise of the Torah. Two criteria must be met to establish a holiday. There must be redemption from certain destruction. This rescue must clearly be through the Almighty's intervention. The events of Purim meet these criteria.

We can now appreciate the fundamental role of the miracle of the oil. Victory in battle is not a sufficient foundation for the creation of Chanukah. The Almighty must reveal Himself as the cause of the triumph and salvation. This revelation took place through the miracle of the oil. With this miracle, Hashem indicated His influence and role in the events of Chanukah.

⁸ Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Introduction.



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Just as the Almighty had performed the miracle of the oil, so too He had been the force behind the salvation.

We can now understand the comments of the Talmud. True, Chanukah celebrates our salvation. However, the celebration could not have been established without the miracle of the *Menorah*. This miracle indicated that salvation was through the intervention of the Almighty. Only on the basis of this revelation could the celebration of Chanukah be created.

The Miracle of the Oil (5768)

For when the Hellenists entered the Temple, they defiled all of the oil. And when the Hashmonaim rose to power and overcame them, they only found one container of oil sealed with the seal of the Kohen Gadol. It only contained sufficient oil for one day. But a miracle was performed with this oil, and they lit from it for eight days. (Tractate Shabbat 21b)

The Talmud explains that one of the miracles of Chanukah was that a small container of oil was sufficient to fuel the *Menorah* of the Temple for only one night. Eight days would be required to secure additional oil. Miraculously, this one small container sufficed for eight nights. Beit Yosef outlines two opinions regarding the precise description of the miracle. One opinion is that the Hashmonaim divided the oil into eight equal parts. They planned to place one-eighth of the oil into the *Menorah* each night. Miraculously, this small portion of the oil was sufficient to fuel the *Menorah* until morning. The second opinion is that on the first night, the entire container of oil was poured into the *Menorah*. After filling the

Menorah, it was found that the container was still full. Each night, the same miracle occurred. The *Menorah* was filled with the contents of the container, and yet it remained full.⁹

The lighting of the *Menorah* in the Temple is one of the commandments of the Torah. Maimonides explains that there are two aspects to this commandment. First, the flame must be perpetual. This means that it must burn every single day without interruption.¹⁰ The second aspect of the commandment is that the flame must be fueled sufficiently to burn from evening until morning.¹¹

The Hashmonaim were confronted with a dilemma. They did not have enough oil to achieve both aspects of the commandment. They could meet only one of these two requirements. The container of oil they recovered provided sufficient oil for the *Menorah* to burn all night, for one night. Alternatively, its oil could be used to ignite the *Menorah* for a portion of the night for each of the eight nights. The two opinions in Beit Yosef are based on a disagreement regarding the essential component of the commandment. If the essential aspect of the commandment is that the *Menorah's* lights burn perpetually every day, then it can be assumed that the Hashmonaim would have placed one-eighth of the oil in the *Menorah* each night. They would forsake the subsidiary objective of providing adequate fuel for the entire night in order to fulfill the essential requirement of maintaining a perpetual light in the Temple. However, if the commandment is understood to place primary emphasis upon the light burning for the entire period of the night, and the requirement of perpetuity is secondary, then it can be assumed that the entire container would be emptied into the *Menorah* on the first evening.

⁹ Rav Yosef Karo, *Bait Yosef Commentary on Tur, Orach Chayim* 670.

¹⁰ Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Temidin U'Musafim 3:10.

¹¹ Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Temidin U'Musafim 3:11.



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This would fulfill the commandment in the appropriate manner for at least one night. ¹²

¹² This insight was suggested by Saruk Gould – a talmid and former faculty member of the Yeshiva.



How Many Candles?

(5765)

Bait Shammai says that on the first night, one kindles eight. From then onwards, one decreases the number. And Bait Hillel says that on the first night, one kindles one. From then onwards, one adds to the number. (Tractate Shabbat 21b)

One of the most well-known disputes regarding the *mitzvah* of the Chanukah lights is in regard to the number of lights that are kindled each night. We follow the practice of Bait Hillel. On the first night, we kindle a single light. Each following night, we add an additional light. This process culminates on the eighth night when eight lights are kindled. However, Bait Shammai suggests an alternative and opposite procedure. According to Bait Shammai, eight lights are kindled on the first night, and one light is subtracted on each subsequent night. On the eighth night, a single candle is kindled.

Table1. Number of lights kindled each night according to Bait Hillel and Bait Shammai

	1 st night	2 nd night	3 rd night	4 th night	5 th night	6 th night	7 th night	8 th night
Bait Hillel	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Bait Shammai	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

The Talmud offers two opinions regarding the explanation of this dispute. The first opinion is rather simple. According to Bait Shammai, the number of lights kindled represents the number of days of Chanukah that remain. On the first night, all eight days remain; eight lights are kindled. On the last night, only a single day remains; a single light is kindled. Bait Hillel maintains that the number of lights kindled represents the number of days that have passed – including the current night. On the first night, no days have yet passed. However, we kindle one light – corresponding with the current night. On the second night, we kindle two lights – corresponding with the day that has passed and the current night.

Although this does seem to be a reasonable explanation of the dispute between Bait Shammai and Bait Hillel, it does present a problem. It is clear that both agree that the number of lights kindled corresponds with the night of Chanukah. In other words, we are counting the nights of Chanukah through the number of lights we kindle. However, once we assume that both Bait Shammai and Bait Hillel agree that the number of lights corresponds with the night of Chanukah, it seems that Bait Hillel's method of counting is more reasonable. It is straightforward and simple. Bait Shammai's method seems somewhat convoluted. Why does Bait Shammai require that we indicate the night of Chanukah by demonstrating how many nights remain?

Rav Yisroel Chait offers an insightful explanation of Bait Shammai's opinion. He begins by asking a simple question. How does one determine how many lights one will kindle on any night? One considers which night it is and then subtracts from eight. So, on the third night, two days of Chanukah have passed. These two days are subtracted from eight, and six lights are kindled. Each night, the number of lights kindled reflects two quantities – the number of days that have passed and the total number of days of Chanukah. This analysis indicates that according to Bait Shammai, the number of lights kindled must reflect both of these quantities. In other words, it is not adequate for the number of lights to merely reflect the number of days that have passed. The lights must also reflect that Chanukah is an eight-day celebration.



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Table 2. Calculation of the number of lights kindled each night according to Bait Shammai

	1 st night	2 nd night	3 rd night	4 th night	5 th night	6 th night	7 th night	8 th night
(a) Total days of Chanukah	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8
(b) Number of days that have passed	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
(a-b) Number of lights	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

We can now better appreciate the dispute between Bait Shammai and Bait Hillel. According to Bait Hillel, the number of lights kindled reflects only a single quantity – the number of days that have passed. But according to Bait Shammai, the number of lights kindled reflects the number of days that have passed and the total number of days of the celebration. In short, on the third night, Bait Hillel's lights communicate only one message; it is the third night of the celebration. Bait Shammai's lights communicate that it is the third night of an eight-day celebration.

However, this raises a new question. According to Bait Shammai, why is it necessary to communicate through the number of lights kindled that Chanukah is an eight-day celebration? Why is it not adequate to simply indicate – through the lights – the number of days of the celebration that have passed?

Rav Chait suggests a simple answer to this question. He explained that the Chanukah lights are more than a method for counting the nights of Chanukah. The lights are designed to communicate and recall the miracle of the *Menorah*; a container holding enough oil for a single day sufficed for eight days. In this context, we can understand Bait Shammai's position. According to Bait Shammai, we must communicate that Chanukah is an eight-day celebration commemorating a miracle that extended over an eight-day period. Each night, we declare which day we are celebrating of an eight-day celebration that commemorates an eight-day miracle.

We can now better understand the dispute between Bait Hillel and Bait Shammai. Both agree that the Chanukah lights do not only communicate the number of the day of Chanukah. They also communicate and recall the miracle of the *Menorah*. As noted, Bait Hillel's method of lighting is clear and straightforward. It communicates to the observer the current night of the miracle and the Chanukah celebration. Bait Shammai's method of determining the number of lights to be kindled is not as straightforward. But this is because it is designed to communicate more information. It communicates the current night of the miracle and celebration. Also, it communicates the total length of the miracle and celebration. In other words, Bait Hillel stresses and emphasizes clarity of communication. Bait Shammai emphasizes the quantity or completeness of the information communicated. Therefore, Bait Shammai sacrifices some clarity in order to communicate a more complete message.¹³

¹³ See *P'nai Yehosua, Commentary on Mesechet Shabbat 21b*.



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The Talmud offers a second explanation of the dispute between Bait Shammai and Bait Hillel. According to this explanation, Bait Shammai maintains that the number of lights kindled is patterned after the sacrifices offered on Succot. These are described in Parshat Pinchas. Thirteen bulls are offered on the first day, and on each subsequent day, one less bull is offered. On the final day – the seventh day of Succot – seven bulls are offered.¹⁴ In other words, just as the number of bulls offered decreases with the passing of each day of Succot, so too the number of lights kindled decreases with the passing of each day of Chanukah.

Bait Hillel maintains that the number of lights increases. This position is based upon a general principle in *halachah* – we are required to bring about ascension in sanctity and not descent. This principle is expressed in various laws. For example, if we sell an object that has sanctity, then we are required to use the funds to purchase an object with greater sanctity. We cannot use the funds for the purchase of an object with lesser sanctity.¹⁵ Based on this principle, Bait Hillel reasons that we are required to increase the number of lights, but we cannot decrease them. Therefore, we add a light each night.

This answer presents an obvious problem. According to Bait Shammai, the Chanukah lights are patterned after the sacrifices of Succot. What is the connection between Succot and Chanukah? Why should the pattern of sacrifices on Succot serve as a model for the number of lights kindled on Chanukah?

In order to answer this question, it is useful to begin with a related issue. As we have explained, there is a general principle in *halachah* of *ma'alin ba'kodesh ve'ayn moredin* – we are required to cause ascension in sanctity and not descent. However, the number of bulls offered on Succot does decrease. Why does the principle of *ma'alin ba'kodesh* not apply to these sacrifices?

There is an interesting discussion in the Talmud that seems to answer this question. The Talmud explains that we are required to recite the entire *Hallel* on each day of Succot. However, on Pesach, we are only required to recite the entire *Hallel* on the first day. The Talmud explains that the reason we recite the full *Hallel* on each day of Succot is that the number of bulls offered differs on each day. These different sacrifices distinguish each day of Succot from the other days of the festival. Because the days are differentiated through the sacrifices, the complete *Hallel* is recited on each day. In contrast, on Pesach the same daily sacrifices are offered on each of the seven days.¹⁶ Because the days are not differentiated through their sacrifices, the complete *Hallel* is only recited on the first day.¹⁷

What is the connection between the differentiation of the days of Succot through their various sacrifices and the recitation of a complete *Hallel*? Apparently, the different sacrifices offered on each day endow each day of Succot with a unique sanctity. Because each day of Succot has a unique sanctity, it requires its own complete *Hallel*. In contrast, the days of Pesach are not differentiated by their sacrifices. Therefore, they all partake of a single sanctity. This single sanctity extends through the entire seven days of Pesach. The single sanctity of Pesach requires a single recitation of the complete *Hallel*.

The implication of this discussion regarding *Hallel* is that there is a fundamental difference between Succot and Pesach. The festival of Succot is composed of a sequence of seven unique but separate days. Each day has its own special sanctity. Pesach is a single sanctity that extends over seven days.

¹⁴ Sefer BeMidbar 29:12-34.

¹⁵ Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Tefilah 11:14.

¹⁶ Sefer BeMidbar 28:18-24.

¹⁷ Mesechet Erechin 10b.



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We can now readily understand why the principle of *ma'alin ba'kodesh* does not apply to Succot. The principle of *ma'alin ba'kodesh* only applies when there is a relationship between a prior and later sanctity – generally, through both relating to a single object. In our above example, the funds received for the sale of an object of sanctity cannot be used to purchase an object of lesser sanctity. This is because the funds would descend from their association with a higher level of sanctity to association with a lesser level. This principle cannot be applied to Succot. The various sacrifices endow each day with a unique and separate sanctity. The sacrifices of one day are not associated with the sacrifices of the next. Therefore, the principle of *ma'alin ba'kodesh* is not applicable.

This helps us understand the Talmud's second explanation of the dispute between Bait Hillel and Bait Shammai. Apparently, according to Bait Hillel, the eight days of Chanukah are patterned after the seven days of Pesach. The eight days share a single designation as Chanukah. Because all eight days partake of a single designation, the principle of *ma'alin ba'kodesh* applies. Bait Shammai contends that eight days of Chanukah are patterned after the seven days of Succot. Each day of Chanukah has its own separate identity. In order to create and communicate each day's uniqueness, the manner in which the lights are kindled is patterned after the Succot sacrifices. In other words, the lights of Chanukah differentiate the days of the celebration – much as the sacrifices of Succot differentiate the days of the festival. The pattern in which the lights are kindled communicates that – like the days of Succot – the various days of Chanukah are separate from one another.



The Importance of the Theme and Message of Chanukah (5771)

During the Second Temple, when the Hellenists ruled, they made decrees against Israel and suppressed their religion. They did not allow them to study Torah and perform the mitzvot. They seized their wealth and their daughters. They entered the Sanctuary, made many breaches in it, and defiled that which was sanctified. Israel was greatly afflicted by them, and they terribly oppressed them (the Jews). But then the G-d of our fathers had compassion for them and rescued them from their hands, and He saved them. The members of the Hashmonai family – high priests – overcame them. They killed them and rescued Israel from their hands. They established a king from among the priests, and sovereignty was restored 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* – led 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 on 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.¹⁸ 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

¹⁸ Mesechet Megilah 7a.



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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 the 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.¹⁹

All 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 not to 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 their own enactment. 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

¹⁹ Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, Recorded Lecture on Purim.



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

²⁰ Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Melachim, chapters 11-12.

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.²⁰

Albo's criticism is not focused upon Maimonides' conception of the Messianic Era. Neither does he challenge Maimonides' assertion that the Torah declares the certainty of this era. His criticism is that Maimonides insists that this doctrine is fundamental to the Torah. Albo argues that the doctrine is far from one of the Torah's essential elements.²¹ Apparently, Albo's position is that this doctrine has no significant relevance to Torah observance and practice. Were 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

²¹ Rav Yosef Albo, *Sefer Halkkarim*, volume1, chapter 4.



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Albo accepts Maimonides' assertion that the Torah includes fundamental doctrines, he objects to including this doctrine among them.

Albo's criticism provides an important insight into his perspective on what makes a doctrine fundamental to the Torah. According to Albo, a fundamental doctrine should function as a foundation upon which the entire religion depends. Any ancillary doctrine cannot be regarded as fundamental. The doctrine of a Messianic Era has little, if any, impact on 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 on 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. Purim and Chanukah reinforce an idea and not a commandment. 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 on the providential relationship between Hashem and the Jewish people. Asserting the certainty of a Messianic Era communicates that although there may be detours and setbacks in the journey of the Jewish people toward their 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. 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 on it, 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.

