

Thoughts on the Chanukah

Chanukah 5786

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A Blessing about Being Blessed

Before we perform a *mitzvah*, we recite a *berachah* – a benediction. Before lighting the Chanukah candles, we recite two *berachot* – benedictions, and on the first night, we add a third – *Shehechyanu*. With this third blessing, we thank Hashem for preserving us and, by preserving us, giving us the opportunity to perform this *mitzvah*.

What are the two *berachot* we recite each night? The first is very typical of the blessings before performing a *mitzvah*.

Blessed are you, Hashem, our L-rd, King of the universe, Who sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us to light the Chanukah candle.

The second *berachah* is far less common.

Blessed are you Hashem, our L-rd, King of the universe, Who performed miracles for our fathers in those days, at this time.

This blessing focuses on the objective of the Chanukah candles. They are intended to remind us of the miracles Hashem performed for our ancestors centuries ago at this time of the year. In other words, the candles remind us of our defeat of our oppressors, the Assyrian Hellenists, and the miracle of the small cruse of oil that fueled the *Menorah* of the *Bait HaMikdash* for eight days.

Let's consider this first blessing more carefully. The Talmud poses an obvious question on this blessing. The question is based on a principle and a fact. The principle is that a *berachah* must be completely accurate. Blessings are not loosely

phrased. They are carefully and precisely formulated. The fact underlying the question is that Chanukah and the *mitzvah* to light its candles is not in the Torah. It was created by our Sages centuries after Hashem gave us the Torah at Sinai. Hashem did not command us to light the Chanukah candles; the Sages did!

So, the Talmud asks, "Where were we commanded?" Rashi explains that this question is not an inquiry; it's an objection. He explains the objection. How can we say, "Blessed are You Hashem ... Who commanded us to light the Chanukah candles." This *berachah* violates the principle that all blessings must be accurate and true. The Torah does not command us; the Sages command us!

The Talmud offers two responses to this compelling objection.

According to the law that they will teach you, and you should do according to the judgment that they say to you. You should not deviate from what they tell you to the right or the left. (Sefer Devarim 17:11)

The first response is straightforward, even predictable. Rav Aviya explains that in the above passage, we *are* commanded to light the Chanukah candles. Now, you ask, "Where does this passage say anything about Chanukah and its candles?" The answer is that this passage authorizes the Sages to interpret the Torah, make decrees, and even create a Rabbinic *mitzvah*. So, yes, indirectly, Hashem, in the Torah, does command us to light the Chanukah candles. He authorizes the Sages to create the *mitzvah* and admonishes us to follow their interpretations, decrees, and commandments.



Recall the days of the world and the years of each generation, ask your father, and he will tell you, your elders, and they will say [it] to you. (Sefer Devarim 32:7)

The second response is the surprise. Rav Nechemya says we are commanded in the above passage.¹ What is the passage saying, and what does it have to do with Chanukah candles?

Let's start with the first question: What is the *pasuk* saying? Moshe admonishes the nation to ask their fathers and elders to share their knowledge of the world's history with them. Their fathers and elders will tell them that the Jewish people are Hashem's portion – His nation. They will explain that this special relationship was evident in the wilderness. Hashem preserved and protected them in this hostile environment. And this relationship will again be demonstrated in their conquest and settlement of the Land of Israel.

So, that's the message of the passage, but what does it have to do with Chanukah? Rambam – Maimonides – will help us out.

In the opening of his code of Torah law, the Mishne Torah, the Rambam lists the 613 *mitzvot*. Each is described in a few words. After completing the list, he acknowledges that the *mitzvot* on it are commanded in the Torah, but that the Sages created other *mitzvot*. Among these is reading Megillat Esther on Purim. Then, Rambam explains why the Sages created this *mitzvah*. He says:

The prophets and the courts ordained and commanded that the Megillah be read at its appointed time to recall the praise of the Holy One, blessed be He, the salvation He wrought for us, and His response to our cries, so that we will bless Him, extol Him, and inform the future generations of the truth of the Torah's promise (Sefer Devarim 4:7): "What nation is so great that it has G-d close to it..."

That's a lot of verbiage. What does it mean? Rambam is explaining why the Sages created the *mitzvah* of reading Megillat Esther on Purim. We are praising Hashem for His rescue of our ancestors. But there is an even greater purpose to the *mitzvah*. We are affirming the truth of the Torah's declaration that we have a special relationship with Hashem. He responds to our cries. He is close to us. He preserves us.

This is the reason the Sages created the *mitzvah* of reading the *Megillah*. We can also conclude that for the same reason, they created the *mitzvah* of lighting the Chanukah candles.

Now, we can understand Rav Nechemya's position. What *mitzvah* are we fulfilling when we light the candles? We are fulfilling the obligation to preserve the record of the miracles that Chanukah commemorates, and we are affirming the Torah's assurance that Hashem hears and responds to our cries.

So, now we understand Rav Nechemya's position. Right? Not so fast. There is a serious problem with this position. Let's review the question Rav Nechemya is answering and consider the validity of his response. Before lighting the candles, we recite a *berachah* in which we say that Hashem commanded us to light the Chanukah candles. The Talmud objects. Hashem did not command us; the Sages invented this *mitzvah*! So, to answer this question, Rav Nechemya needs to identify the *mitzvah* Hashem gave in the Torah that we fulfill by lighting the candles. He responds that we are passing along to future generations the record of the wonders Hashem did for us and that we are affirming the Torah's assurance of our special relationship with Him. Well, here's the problem. It's not clear that there is such a *mitzvah* in the Torah! Indeed, it's not among the *mitzvot* listed by Rambam.

¹ Mesechet Shabbat 23a.



Or maybe it is. Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik Zt”l was troubled by this problem and offered a novel solution. He suggests that the basis of our obligation to recall the miracles of Chanukah and praise Hashem in response to them is the *mitzvah* of *VeHagaddetah Le’Vincha* – the commandment to retell the story of our redemption from Egypt on the first night of Pesach. Of course, that *mitzvah* does not obligate us to light the Chanukah candles; the Sages established that obligation. However, the Sages based their actions on this *mitzvah*. It obligates us to detail the wonders of our redemption and to recognize Hashem's kindness to us. Based on Moshe's admonishment, the Sages extrapolated that other episodes of miraculous national salvation also warrant acknowledgment and praise to Hashem. On this basis, they established, first, the *mitzvah* of reading the *Megillah*, and second, the *mitzvah* of lighting the Chanukah candles.² In other words, no Torah obligation explicitly obligates us to light the candles; however, lighting the candles does fulfill the objective of the *mitzvah* of *VeHagaddetah LeVincha*.

Now, let's return to the dispute between Rav Aviya and Rav Nechemya. To review, both are answering the question: To what *mitzvah* are we referring when we make the first blessing over the candles and say, “Who commanded us to light the Chanukah candle?” According to Rav Aviya, we are referring to the obligation to obey the Sages – the commandment that authorizes them to create new laws. According to Rav Nechemya, we are referring to Moshe's admonishment to the nation to ask our fathers and elders to share with us the miracles that Hashem has performed for us and to describe for us our special relationship with Him. We have discovered that Moshe's admonition is rooted in the Torah obligation of *VeHagaddetah LeVincha* – the *mitzvah* of retelling the story of our redemption from Egypt.

We can now understand the dispute between these two Sages. Both acknowledge that two *mitzvot* are involved in our obligation to light the Chanukah candles. The *mitzvah* that directly obligates us is the *mitzvah* to obey our Sages. This empowers them to create this new *mitzvah*. The second *mitzvah* involved is *VeHagaddetah LeVincha*. It is this *mitzvah*'s objective that is fulfilled through the Chanukah candles. Their dispute is only over which of these commandments the *berachah* refers to. According to Rav Aviya, it refers to the commandment that underlies our obligation. This is the commandment to obey the Sages. According to Rav Nechemya, the *berachah* refers to the Torah *mitzvah* whose objective is supported by lighting the candles. This is the *mitzvah* of *VeHagaddetah LeVincha*.

This has been a halachic analysis. But is there a lesson that we can take away from this discussion? Yes, there is, and it's important on multiple levels. Let's return to Rambam's explanation for why the Sages created the *mitzvot* of Purim and Chanukah. He explained that through these *mitzvot*, we recall that Hashem rescued us in times of peril and we affirm our belief in the Torah's assurance that we have a special relationship with Hashem.

Why is this message so important? Why did the Sages create two new *mitzvot* in response to it? When we consider the history of our people, there are two concurrent themes. One is that we have repeatedly suffered persecution, expulsion, and even genocide. The other theme is that despite these persistent efforts to destroy us, we are still here. We have our own state, and in many ways, we are thriving. Because we encounter hatred, persecution, and even threats to our existence so frequently – in virtually every generation, it's easy – even natural – for these tragic episodes to become the focus of our attention. When that happens, we miss the bigger

² Rav Hershel Schachter and Rav Menachem Genack, editors, *Mesorah* vol 13, p 15.



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picture. Our determined enemies never succeed. Here we are, thriving. We need the *mitzvot* of Chanukah and Purim to refocus our attention on this bigger picture. We have a special relationship with Hashem, and He preserves us.

There is a second lesson we should take from this. The way we experience our lives is very similar to the history of our people. There are ups and downs, moments of happiness and joy interspersed with disappointments, tragedies, and losses. Some people have a naturally positive disposition. They easily get over the negatives

and focus on the positive. Others are completely haunted by the negatives, fixated on them, and persistently depressed. But some of us can choose. Some of us can work on ourselves to shift our focus from the negatives to the positives. If we exercise this ability, we can infuse our lives with more joy. The message of these *mitzvot*, when applied to our personal lives, is to take the time and make the effort to notice our blessings. It's easy enough to respond to the negative, but it requires effort not to take the positives for granted. But the effort is worth it.

