

TorahFax: Vayeishev
Rabbi Zalmen Marazov

Monday, Kislev 21, 5784 / December 4, 2023

The miracle of Chanukah, which commemorates the victory of good over evil and the victory of light over darkness, took place over two thousand years ago. Yet, we celebrated Chanukah year after year for over two thousand years. Throughout the generations, Jews drew great spiritual strength from the holiday of Chanukah and its en-lightening message.

This is especially true today, when the forces of darkness and evil are fighting us from every corner of the world, from near and far, from above ground and from the tunnels beneath.

Every Jewish holiday, no matter how long ago it took place, is a lesson for us today. The purpose of lighting the Menorah and celebrating the miracle of Chanukah today is to illuminate our own personal path in life so that we see and appreciate our individual miracles which take place each and every day.

Some miracles are obvious, and we recognize them as such. However, most are hidden, for they are constant and thus are concealed in what we call "nature." A more accurate term for what is commonly known as "nature" would be, "constant miracles." We refer to them as nature because they are constant, and we are exposed to them all the time. In truth, every second of every day is a real miracle.

Miracles are usually defined as something which is out of the ordinary, unexpected and cannot be explained. They defy and challenge the laws of nature. Things which we come to expect and happen continuously are generally categorized as "nature."

In truth, nature is the greatest miracle of all. The very fact that G-d makes these things happen so normally and so ordinarily, is the greatest miracle.

Three times each day in the Amidah prayer, we acknowledge this with the following words: "We thankfully acknowledge that You are the L-rd... You are the strength of our life... We offer blessings and thanks for our lives which are in Your hands, for our souls which are entrusted to You and for Your miracles which are with us daily."

In darkness, one can be standing next to the greatest treasure, but will not see nor appreciate it. It takes the power of light to reveal that treasure. "Nature" is like darkness which conceals G-d. It is one of the tests and challenges we are presented with, each day. It takes wisdom and understanding, which is compared to "light" to find and see G-d's hand within nature.

"A small amount of light drives away much darkness," say our sages. The world around us can at times be full of darkness. Chanukah serves to put light into our lives, so we see G-d's miracles that constantly accompany us and thus feel that G-d loves us! Although we do not have the Holy Temple today, every Jewish home is our personal Holy Temple in which G-d dwells to the extent we bring Him into our home. As we will look at the Chanukah lights, this Chanukah, we should rejoice and be thankful for all the natural daily miracles, because G-d is with us all the time!

Tuesday, Kislev 22, 5784 / December 5, 2023

Thursday night will begin the holiday of Chanukah – the holiday of lights. Chanukah commemorates the miracle of the oil in the Holy Temple, when a small flask, which had enough oil for only one day, miraculously lasted for eight days.

The first night of Chanukah, we light one candle. Each night of Chanukah we add an additional candle until the eighth night, when we light all eight candles.

The last night of Chanukah is always the same night of the week as the first night. Thus, this year when the first night of Chanukah is Thursday night, the eighth night will also be Thursday night.

Before lighting the Chanukah candles, we light one candle, called “Shamesh.” With the light of the Shamesh we light the Chanukah candles. Then we place the Shamesh in the Menorah, but not in the same row as the Chanukah candles, to make it obvious that it is not one of the Chanukah candles.

Q. Is Chanukah a Biblical holiday, or a rabbinical holiday?

A. Chanukah and Purim are rabbinical holidays. The miracle of Chanukah took place about 1200 years after the Giving of the Torah. It was established by the sages to commemorate this great miracle.

Q. Which holiday came first, Chanukah or Purim?

A. The miracle of Purim took place between the first and second Temples, while Jews were in Exile. The miracle of Chanukah happened during the time of the Second Temple - 200 years after the miracle of Purim.

Q. As mentioned, Purim and Chanukah are both rabbinical holidays, why is the "Hallel" recited on Chanukah and not on Purim?

A. The miracle of Chanukah took place in the Temple in the Holy Land while the miracle of Purim took place in Persia. Hallel is recited for miracles which happened in the Land of Israel.

Another reason is that for Purim they established the reading of the Megilah, which tells the story of the miracle of Purim. Reading the story of the miracle is our praise to G-d for this miracle. Since on Chanukah there is no Megilah reading, we recite the Hallel, which praises G-d for the miracle.

Q. Why do we light an extra candle each night, called the "Shamesh"?

A. We are prohibited to have any personal use from the Chanukah lights. Thus, by having the extra candle, if we forget and benefit from the light of the Menorah, it will be from the Shamesh and not from the Chanukah lights.

Thursday, Kislev 24, 5784 / December 7, 2023

Tonight (Thursday night) begins the holiday of Chanukah, which has been celebrated by Jews for over two thousand years. It is the victory of light over darkness. Although Chanukah is an ancient holiday associated with the Menorah lights in the Temple, yet, in every generation we have to deal with the darkness we are faced against. In our days, the darkness is so obvious everywhere, from the streets, to the universities, to the U.N. This year the Chanukah lights announce loud and clear; Am Yisroel Chai.

Tonight, we light the first Chanukah candle. An additional candle is lit each night.

Q. Why is it customary to also light the Chanukah Menorah in the synagogue and in public places?

A. It is a mitzvah to publicize the miracle of Chanukah as much as possible. Thus, although we light the Menorah at home, it is also a mitzvah to kindle it in the synagogue in order to publicize the miracle of Chanukah for those attending synagogue.

2) Another reason is that today the synagogue takes the place of the Holy Temple. Being that the miracle took place in the Holy Temple, it is important to kindle the Chanukah lights also in synagogue, which is called, "a miniature Temple."

3) Another reason is that there may be people in synagogue who are traveling and have no place to light their Chanukah candles. Thus, the sages required that the Chanukah Menorah also be lit each night in the synagogue for those who are in transit.

Q. Why is it customary to place the Chanukah Menorah in synagogue on the south wall?

A. To commemorate the Menorah in the Holy Temple which stood on the south side in the Sanctuary.

Q. Before Shabbat and holidays, candles are lit in every Jewish home. Yet, we see a difference between the Chanukah candles and the Shabbat and holiday candles. The Shabbat candles are lit inside the home on the table where we eat. Chanukah candles are lit near a door or window. Why the difference?

A. The purpose of the Shabbat and holiday candles is to bring light and peace within our home. Thus, the candles are lit on the table so that we can enjoy our meals with the additional lights. The purpose of the Chanukah lights is to publicize the miracle of Chanukah and to illuminate the spiritual darkness of the outside world. Thus, the Chanukah lights are lit near the window to bring light to the outside.

Q. Why is it prohibited to have any personal benefit from the Chanukah lights?

A. Because the Chanukah lights commemorate the lights of the Menorah in the Holy Temple. Just as one was prohibited to have any personal benefit or use of the objects in the Temple, so too, we are prohibited to have any use from the Chanukah lights.

Friday, Kislev 25, 5784 / December 8, 2023

HAPPY CHANUKAH. Today (Friday) is the first day of Chanukah.

In the Talmud there are various opinions as to how we perform the mitzvah of the Chanukah candles.

According to the opinion of the Rabbis of the House of Shamai, one should light all eight candles the first night of Chanukah, seven on the second night, six on the third night, etc. Thus, lighting one candle less each night, until the last night when we light only one candle.

However, we don't hold by this opinion. We go by the ruling of the House of Hillel who say that the first night we light one candle, the second night two candles, the third night three, etc. Thus, adding a candle each night, until the final night of Chanukah, when we light all eight candles.

The reasoning of the House of Shamai is that already on the first day the miracle happened, and the oil had the potential to burn for eight days. Although, it wasn't obvious yet, the potential for the miracle was there already. But Hillel says that when it comes to performing a mitzvah we add and do not subtract. If we would start with eight and then go down to one candle, we would be going from more to less and with mitzvot we do the opposite – we add in holiness.

Hillel's ruling was accepted as law, and we perform the mitzvah of Chanukah lights by adding an additional candle each night. This way we go up each day with the performance of this mitzvah.

This concept and lesson to go higher and higher in performing mitzvot, is first visible when we kindle the second candle on Friday, thus adding an additional candle from the previous night. It will become even more prominent as we go through the eight days of Chanukah.

This lesson applies to all good deeds. We must always aspire to do more than before. We shouldn't be satisfied with our past accomplishments but strive to do more and go higher and higher.

Q. What is the significance of the four Hebrew letters on the Dreidel; Nun, Gimel, Hay, Shin?

A. The four letters on the Dreidel stand for: "Nes, Gadol, Haya, Sham" - "A great miracle happened there." These four letters were usually written for the dreidels in the Diaspora.

In Israel, the letter "Shin" is substituted with the letter "Pay". It stands for the Hebrew word "Poh", "Here" ("A great miracle happened here"), for the miracle took place in Israel.