

Chanukah, By the Rav - Rambam Hilchot Hanukah

- By Rav Joseph B. Solovietchik

PIRSUM HANES on Hanukah. Why is it different from Purim? How does it compare to Pesach? The subjective nature of MEHADRIDIN MIN HAMEHADRIDIN. Rambam comparing it with wine for Shabbat, 4 cups on Pesach. Hanukah is the only Yom Tov not mentioned in KITVEI HAKODESH. No text on Hanukah. We interpret the miracle through NEROT. similar to SIPUR YETZIAT MITZRAYIM. Second problem: Two levels of persecution, not only on Hanukah, but also through the ages. A third problem. The difference between TEFILA and ZEAKA. ZEAKA - an animal outcry. Not a prayer. As in Egypt's slavery. Will Hashem help without prayer? It depends whether we would otherwise survive...

HANUKAH, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitch, zt"l

(Lecture delivered by Rabbi Soloveitchik on Saturday night, December 30, 1978 at Talner Synagogue on the Yahrzeit of the Talner Rebbetzen z"l, seventh day of Chanukah.)

Tonight, I shall read and interpret a few sentences from Rambam on Hilchos Hanukah. If you read the Rambam, you note striking resemblances to the prayer AL HANISIM. (HILCHOT MEGILAH VEHANUKAH are in the same section. HILCHOT HANUKAH starts from chapter III.) The Rambam declares that the mitzvah of Hanukah is an exceedingly precious mitzvah (4:12). One should be particularly careful in order to make known, to publicize the miracle and to add and offer additional praise to the Almighty for the miracles He performed. Even if a man has no food except that received through Z'DAKAH he should beg for or sell a garment for oil for the Hanukah lamp. Maimonides declares that this mitzvah is so precious that it falls into the identical category with wine for Shabbat, ARBA KOSOT for Pesach and the giving of MACHATZIT HASHEKEL, where, likewise, a man must borrow or sell something to perform these mitzvot. Just so Rambam declares it precious, and one should borrow in order to inform the people of the NES HANUKAH (4:13).

So we ask the obvious question: The reading of MEGILAT ESTHER is just as important. Why didn't Maimonides include that mitzvah in the same special category, requiring even the poorest of the poor to beg or borrow to perform that mitzvah? In fact, according to Rambam, when Hanukah was introduced, it was fashioned after KRIYAT MEGILAT ESTHER.

In Chapter three of Rambam's HILCHOT HANUKAH, he stresses that Purim preceded Hanukah by 200 years, saying that the miracle of Hanukah "happened during BAIS SHENI". Why did we have to be told? Why is the time fixed in history? Apparently, Rambam tried to introduce something new -- something we wouldn't otherwise have known.

The answer is simple. All YAMIM TOVIM are mentioned in TORAH SH'BIKSAV except Hanukah. Hanukah took place at a time when NEVUAH was already absent. There were no more prophets. In other words, there is no Biblical text for Chanukah, such as the Chumash, Tanach - Neviim - or K'suvim. Esther prevailed in her arguments that the MEGILAH should be incorporated into the Biblical text. On the other hand, all we know of the "text" of Hanukah is

merely found in TORAH SHEBEAL PEH, in the MISHNAH and the GEMARAH.

The Gemarah asks Mai Hanukah. Where is the text that authorizes or constitutes it as a holiday? Where is the text? The answer is MEGILAT ESTHER! We derive the authority from “Esther”. However, although the two holidays are similar in that we are obliged to publicize the miracle, the performance of Hanukah and Purim differ radically from each other. Purim is limited to one act -- namely the reading of MEGILAT ESTHER. It is standardized and fixed and must be read by all, sage, scholar and secular individual. It is specific and limited. There is no difference in its performance such as MEHADRIN or MEHADRIN MIN HAMEHADRIN. It is addressed to everyone alike. If I were to add something to the required text, I would have achieved nothing. If I read less, I nullify the mitzvah. As with TORAH SHEBIKTAV any changes render it null; and in this respect it resembles KRIYAT SHMA to which nothing can be added or subtracted. It is forbidden to add or subtract from a scriptural MITZVAH, LO TOSIFU VELO TIGREU. It can be compared to BIRCHAT KOHANIM which cannot be altered.

On Hanukah, however, there is no text. The mitzvah is PIRSUM HANES, for it depends on pure TORAH SHEBEAL PEH. If one reads the Chumash and does not understand a word, the mere act of reading is a mitzvah. Reading the MEGILAT HANUKAH (which is found in some sidurim) is absurd, because it is not a Biblical written text. The text of MEGILAT HASHMONAIM is not applicable. On Hanukah, the PIRSUME NISSA -- publicizing the miracle, is not achieved by reading any text. It is achieved by means of the NEROT. Do the NEROT tell a story? Actually, there was a period in history during persecutions when candles were used in windows to relate information to other Jews such as that a SIMCHA, such as a wedding, was taking place. One would see the candles and would understand. That is the reason candles are still used at weddings. By reciting the PESUKIM of HANEROT HALALU immediately after lighting the candles, we interpret the miracle. This is LIMUD, not SIPPUR -- teaching, not declaring. We interpret the miracle. It is an esoteric act. We must understand that only in connection with Hanukah there is no limit to what a man can declare -- can publicize. That which the scholar is capable of doing is beyond the capabilities of the ordinary man. The pious exceeds the ordinary! What is MEHADRIN? -- Zeal, depending on the action of a person. It is permissible for a person to light only one candle. If one is not satisfied with the basic structure of mitzvah and wants to express more gratitude, he can perform the mitzvah on three different levels or plateaus. If someone, for instance, lit the candle and forgot to say the BERACHA, he would be told, “Recite it over the second or third candle”. It can be one candle for all -- or many candles for all. On Hanukah, if we light one candle we get one reward, and for additional candles, we get additional rewards.

Of course that is not so in connection with the mitzvah of reading the MEGILAH! If we read it over several times we receive but one credit for one Megilah reading. The rest is merely KRIAH, reading. On Hanukah, however, there is the average, the MEHADRIN, (those with zeal) and MEHADRIN MIN MEHADRIN (those who go above and beyond the average and the zealous). My grandfather used to say that the hardest thing to take leave of during the entire year is the end of Yom Kippur -- the end of NEILAH when we recite HASHEM HU HAELOKIM. The same applies to Hanukah. We would like to light candles endlessly, but it is halakhically impossible. This is what Rambam meant when he said that it is a very precious miracle and we want to express our gratitude to the Almighty for it. It is precious and we should offer additional praise to

G-d. I want to pour out my heart and thank Him. We want to experience the unlimited CHESED, which G-d poured onto His people. And the limit of the observance is determined by the capabilities of the individual!

The Gemarah Shabbos says BAMEH MADLIKIN, certain oils were interdicted on Shabbat because they don't burn well or have odors. On Hanukah we can use any kind of oil. Still, it all depends on the sensitivity of the individual all the way up to the purest SHEMEN ZAYIT if we feel that other oils do not produce lights that are beautiful enough. From the halakhic point of view, all oils and wicks are acceptable. The PIRSUM HANES, however, varies with the individual.

Interestingly, the Gemarah says that if I utilize the candle for profane reasons, no one will recognize it as representing a miraculous purpose. Every Hanukah a Jew should discover something new which he didn't know before. It should increase our capabilities and our sensitivities. I should dig and make an effort. And so it is a mitzvah on several levels. Some people demand more and can digest more. It is comparable to SIPUR YETZIAT MITZRAIM, SHEKOL HAMARBE LESAPER BESIPUR YETZIAT MITZRAYIM, HAREY ZE MESHUBACH. We have ECHOD CHOCHOM - ECHOD TAM - ECHOD SHEAYNO YODEA LISHOL - representing different capabilities and mentalities of children. It was made possible for us to relate the exodus on several levels from the smallest child to the most learned. The reason that is so, is because the HAGGADAH, too, is not a KRIYAH of a Biblical text but a MIDRASH. Wherever TORAH SHEBEAL PEH is involved, there is no limit. The GEONIM excommunicated those that thought they could merely recite SIDRAT VAERA and BO on Pesach. That would negate the TORAH SHEBEAL PE value of the mitzvah by introducing a written text of the Torah.

There is a second problem.

The Rambam tries to convey to us something characteristic, not only of the religious persecution of the HASHMONAIM, but of all ages. At one level they (the enemy) told the people to violate the mitzvot. "Either you violate or face martyrdom". On a second level, they did not force the Jew to do anything but they themselves violated and profaned the most holy institution of the BAIT HAMIKDASH. In our time, it was comparable to the acts of the Nazis who burned the Torah before the eyes of the Jews or cut out pieces with scissors. The enemies of the HASHMONAIM themselves, defiled the Temple. It was an expression of contempt and desecration of that basic institution. Both methods were employed. They forced the people to violate the laws, and they themselves violated the Temple. They forced the individual to abstain from Torah and Mitzvot. Their acts of defiance against our faith and our Law expressed their contempt and disdain, as if to say, "I don't care for the Jew; I will take away his holy property". They interfered with the freedom of the individual and displayed public contempt for our people and its holy institutions. If one defiles the people by defiling that which is holy to them, the Jewish people are commanded to resist. They enemy wants to show the world that the Jew is a coward and will not defend his holy scriptures and places. Why was the Jew at the time of the HASHMONAIM not passive? That which precipitated the action of the Jews was that they offered the head of a pig on the altar. This is what we mean in Hallel when we say, LO LONU HASHEM, LO LONU, KI IM LESHIMCHA - They are not asking anything of us, but they

“desecrate your Holy Name”. Yose Ben Yoezer’s nephew was amongst the “reformers” of that time. When he was told to remove certain vessels from the Temple, he did so. But when told to remove the menorah, he refused, and was subsequently tortured.

ULECHATZUM LCHATZ GADOL (Rambam 3:1). Compare with VAYARE ET LCHATZAYNU

There is something conspicuously missing in Rambam, something that seems puzzling. The Rambam does not mention prayer at all -- that the Almighty should have mercy upon them and defend them. Apparently, there was no intercession at the time of Hanukah. It is said that there was no prayer in YETZIAT MITZRAIM either, even though it says VAYIZAKU. ZEAKA is not really prayer but rather an outcry of pain such as any creature would emit if wounded or injured. This is what Rambam says that VAYIZAKU means. It was an instinctive reaction. The Rambam says that HAKADOSH BARUCH HU accepted it as prayer even though it wasn’t really prayer. He accepted it as such. In YETZIAS MITZRAIM the first prayer recorded was at the Red Sea -- not in Egypt itself. The prime question is: “Does G-d help people in distress without prayer or is there no CHESED without prayer?”

The Midrash raises the problem. The people must seize the initiative. “You seize the initiative and you’ll come close to G-d”, as the pasuk says, SHUVA EILAY VAASHUVA ALEICHEM. On the other hand, G-d often helps not only one who prays but one who cannot help himself. The problem is, Must man seize the initiative? Actually, both methods are correct. What should be the criterion? Sometimes, man is silent; sometimes G-d waits for man to take the initiative. When does each apply?

The answer is: It depends if people can survive without intervention. Sometimes, it is painful and difficult but people can survive, for example MILCHEMET AMALEK. In MITZRAIM, why did G-d “jump over the mountains”? (MEDALEG AL HEHARIM, MEKABETZ AL HAGEVAHOT.) They were not there for the full 400 years promised to Abraham; in fact, they were there for far less. He said, “If they remain there longer, there will be nothing left”. That is why He “jumped over mountains”. There simply was no time. If the people still would have had the heroic power to endure, then G-d would wait for them to come to Him. LCHATZ is pressure. “Either they will be set free or no nation will there be.” Moshe said, “It is wonderful but the 400 years are not up!” Hashem answered, “They cannot wait”. There is either going to be a GEULAH or they will disappear: redemption or vanishing. This is what Rambam says. There was no prayer. We are told that the assimilation had penetrated the homes of the KOHANIM. Why did He bestow his CHESED? Because it was impossible for them to live on without it. So even if they were not worthy, He bestowed His CHESED and redeemed them in Egypt, and in the same way, saved them from the oppressors on Chanukah.

[Editor’s note. Evidence for this idea can be clearly seen in the passage in Melachim II 14:23-28, referring to the sins of the second Yeravam, Yeravam ben Yoash: VAYAAS HARA BEEYNEI HASHEM, LO SAR MIKOL HATOT YERAVAM BEN NEVAT ASHER HECHETI ET YISRAEL. Nevertheless, he widened the boundaries of the land of Israel MILEVO HAMAT AT YAM HAARAVA [even greater than in the time of David and Solomon], KI RAAH HASHEM ET ANI YISRAEL MOREH MEOD, VEEFES ATZOR VEEFES AZUV, VEEYN OZER

LEYISRAEL. VELO DIBER HASHEM LIMCHOT ET SHEM YISRAEL MITACHAT
HASHAMAYIM, VAYOSHIEM BEYAD YERAVAM BEN YOASH.

The English translation is as follows: (Melachim II Chapter 14) 23. In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash king of Israel began to reign in Samaria and reigned forty-one years. 24. And he did that which was evil in the sight of Hashem; He departed not from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who had caused Israel to sin. 25. He restored the border of Israel from the entry of Hamath even unto the sea of the plain, according to the words of the L-rd G-d of Israel . . . 26. For Hashem saw the affliction of Israel, that it was very bitter: for there was none to lead and none to help, so that there was no one to save Israel. 27. And Hashem had said that he would not utterly blot out the name of Israel from under the heaven: so he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash. (NES)]
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