

RUACH S'ARAH





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## **Editor's Note**

### *Chanukkah 5785*

In the beginning, “וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאֹר כִּי־טוֹב, וַיַּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ” - “God saw that the light was good, and God separated between the light and between the darkness” (*Bereshit* 1:4).

When we began compiling and editing the articles for this issue of *Ruach S'ARah*, reading the masterful work of our fellow students, we were surprised to see how many writers were drawn to the image of light, of burning candles in the dark night and the message(s) they convey. Many of our artists, too, seemed focused on the warm glow of Chanukkah. Perhaps in these dark times, when the day is short, the future unfocused, and the realities of war seem to march on endlessly, we feel the need to find the light in our world.

But how do we draw light from darkness? Charlotte Filer, '25, reflects on how the structure of the Menorah teaches us that light is found through unity. Zachary Friedman, '27, and Yonatan Fromer, '27, both touch on the idea that staying rooted in our culture and Jewish values, as the Maccabees did, can serve as a powerful source of light. Evident throughout this edition is the many ways each person discovers their own light in the darkness. Light finds its way into every one of our lives. One of the ways many students have found light during this war, we hope and believe, is through the Torah contained in the pages *Ruach S'ARah*. We are so excited to share this edition, this source of light, that each of our writers and artists have worked so hard in making.

There are a number of people we must thank for their generous contributions to this issue of *Ruach S'ARah*. First and foremost, thank you Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Wadler. Your expertise and generosity, hard work and commitment, is integral to the journal, and we are so grateful to have you as our Faculty Advisor.

We must give a big thank you to Ms. Anabell Peña and Ms. Karen Brooks, who have until now acted as this journal's publishers, despite their very busy daily schedules. In addition, Karen Brooks' encouragement and belief in this journal's worth inspired us to finally have *Ruach S'ARah* published professionally. Thank you to Malki Bernstein for supporting us and taking care of all the complicated logistics required to print this issue.

Once again, we must express our gratitude to all the Judaic Studies faculty at SAR High School, whose care and concern for their students does not go unnoticed.

Finally, thank you to all the students — writers and artists, from every grade — who have spent hours working on articles, artwork, and Torah in every shape and form, enhancing Chanukkah for us all.

*Chanukkah Sameach*, and may we merit to see *Hashem's* miracles in our days, as our ancestors did at this time so many years ago.

— NATE HAIN, '25, and NOA SCHLAFF-PEARLBERG, '26  
*Editors-in-Chief*

## All of the Lights

### *Tracing Significant Jewish Illuminators*

By CHARLOTTE FILER, '25

Menorah, *chanukkiyah*, lamplight, fire — various means through which religious Jews have experienced light throughout history. Over the course of the following *dvar* Torah, I aim to capture a few ideas: the purpose of the various lights we have used for religious practices, and the significance and messages of each, all while tracing their progression and depictions over time.

Studying light in Jewish history, we would be remiss to skip over *the* light, in ch. 1 of *Bereshit*. The *pasuk* reads: “וַיִּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאֹר כִּי-טוֹב, וַיִּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ” - “God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness” (*Bereshit* 1:4). Clearly, the light is drawing out the darkness which preceded it, and based on the fact that it was good, it seems that light is the ideal. Rashi (commentary ad loc., s.v. “וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאֹר כִּי טוֹב וַיִּבְדֵּל”) brings in a *gemara* from *Chagigah* (12a) which explains God splitting light and darkness such that the wicked could not use the light. The light was separated and reserved for the righteous in the world to come. *Bereshit Rabbah* 3:6 further claims that this is a metaphor for good and bad actions, explaining that they should not occur together. Thus to limit the intersection of the two, good was for daytime, in the light, and bad was at night, in the dark. From these two conclusions, it seems that light represents good, dark represents bad, and the two are meant primarily to not coexist. When they partially coexist, darkness seems to ideally be drowned out by light.

That said, this separatist nature is soon altered in ch. 3 of *Sefer Shemot*, wherein we find the story of the burning bush (*Shemot* 3:2). In this moment, *Hashem* reveals to Moshe a profound symbol that not only conveys the power of God to transcend the principles of science and nature but offers a deeper insight into the human experience. The bush, something which would naturally be consumed by and burn from a flame, is surviving, perhaps thriving, amidst the fire. This is quite comparable to religious people in the modern day, experiencing a spiritual awakening without being consumed by worldly challenges, and facing resilience in adversity. And why then would *Hashem* want to reveal this to Moshe as he begins his transformation to leader of the Jewish people? An obvious interpretation is that this resilience symbolizes a triumphing light over darkness that so often consumes us as religious individuals seeking out *Hashem*. However, I would like to follow an alternative theme that I believe to be more nuanced. This bush illustrates a certain coexistence between the earthly and the divine, as the bush serves as an intermediary between God and Moshe, suggesting that this relationship is not finite, or strictly dichotomous, as the *Gemara* might imply.

After the Exodus, we see the pillar of fire from God, a light that guides the Jewish people (13:21). What is so cool is that this fire is used only at night by *Hashem* to guide the people, with a cloud during the day. To me, this light seems to mirror the light of Creation pretty well, being used for good and guidance, driving out the darkness of the night. But, the necessity of night is apparent, in contrast with the Bereshit Rabbah's claim that night was all bad. It was possible for the Jews to have just had a really long day if they were traveling, but perhaps *Hashem* wanted to convey His power at night, reestablishing what He had at the dawn of time.

We finally arrive at the Menorah. In *Shemot* 25, *Hashem* instructs Moshe exactly how to build the Mishkan, including the Menorah, made of a single piece of solid gold, six branches total. On each branch there would be three cups and on the stem, there'd be four cups shaped like almond blossoms, with a calyx and petal, totaling to six and yet somehow having seven lamps mounted on the front side, made entirely of a talent of gold, and these patterns are displayed to Moshe on "the mountain," i.e., *Har Sinai* (25:31-40). The commandment to produce the vessel with solid gold is intentionally repeated twice, in vv. 31 and 39, likely highlighting its significance. Rashi realizes that in order for the branches to be of the same, as commanded, they'd have to be made as one piece, as opposed to individual branches being strung together (commentary on 25:31, s.v. "ממנה יהיו"). There is an emphasis on a unity of the components in the construction of the Menorah, for the sake of its quality. But the Torah wouldn't tell us this important fact more than once for no reason. I assert that in fact we see this unity as a required component to radiate light and in turn goodness.

A mere seven chapters later, we see what happens when something is constructed of many pieces of gold, strung together, as Rashi comments, and it does not work out very well. In *Shemot* 32, we read the story of the golden calf, constructed by Bnei Yisrael, who believe that Moshe has been gone for too long and thus plot to construct an idol. Aharon instructs them, "פָּרְקוּ נְזָמֵי הַזֶּהָב אֲשֶׁר בְּאָזְנֵי נְשֵׁיכֶם, בְּנִיכֶם, וּבְנֹתֵיכֶם וְהָבִיאוּ אֵלַי" - "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me" (*Shemot* 32:2). These rings are smelted together for their idol, and in reaction, *Hashem* tells Moshe that He will "וַיַּחַר-אַפִּי בָהֶם" - "Let My anger blaze forth against them" (32:10). Fundamentally, this is a good parallel because we see the nation combining their gold for this vessel and *Hashem* directly retaliates with a threat of His own, much stronger, fire and light power. After understanding that the Menorah is to be constructed as one piece, it is clear that this was entirely an improper method for worship (besides of course the idolatry, but more of an emphasis here on the fact that this is not *Hashem's* style). Here, we see that if man is making the light source, as opposed to the Godly bush in ch. 3, it requires a certain unity from our part, perhaps re-emphasizing the connection between the earthly and light as a means of projecting light and goodness. The unity of the Menorah's gold could also highlight the unity and singularity of God.



We see a rehashing of light as a positive protection from *Hashem* in the *Birkat Kohanim* prescribed in *Bemidbar*. The *kohanim* say in this blessing, “יָאֵר יְהוָה פְּנֵיו אֵלֶיךָ” - “May *HASHEM* shine the light of His fact on you” (6:25). I’d assert that this is implying that *Hashem*’s countenance, clearly not a literal face as we know one, projects the light such that it can be instilled in each of us. There is a clear assumption that *Hashem*, the ideal being, has light which is synonymous with kindness and gratuity, as the NJPS, and many others, translate the light: “deal kindly.” This follows the suggestion that light is necessary to drive out unkindness.

There is another aspect of light, exhibited in *Tehillim*. We see David *ha-Melekh* writing an acrostic poem with eight verses dedicated to each Hebrew letter. He describes the Torah, saying “נֵר-לְרַגְלֵי דְבַרְךָ, וְאוֹר לְנִתְיָבְתִי” - “Your word is a lamp to my feet, a light for my path” (119:105). David emphasizes the Torah as a life code, but specifically through the metaphor of a guiding light. Something we are quite familiar with. It brings together light and *Hashem*’s instructions once more. *Hashem*’s gracious instructions are light.

Over Chanukkah, we light our *chanukkiyot*, bringing light into our homes for the sake of publicizing the miracle. To circle back to our creation story, it is important to note the distinction between the creation narratives in chapters 1 and 2 of *Bereshit*. In the first chapter, there are no people when light is created; in the second, humanity is formed as the purpose for which all else is created. This juxtaposition of absence and the beginning of society highlights the coexistence of light and darkness. In the second narrative, this coexistence is a given for humans and not fundamental to their understanding of the world at the time. Yet in both narratives, humans need to experience *Hashem* and His Torah as the light of the world, recognizing their own place beneath this, and striving to recreate it through following the word of *Hashem*. Flash now to Chanukkah: I’d argue that in our time, when *Hashem* is not manifesting overt miracles, we have the responsibility, each Shabbat, and annually during this holiday, to recognize that we have an obligation to kindness in the world. We should learn from *Hashem*’s compassion in our highest sense for the purpose of creating a better world within our own capacity. Just as the bush stood resilient in adversity, we must be compelled by the light of *Hashem* and bring our own light into the world.

As we strive to follow the teachings of the Torah — our guiding light — in the coming year, it is essential to commit to actions that foster love, compassion, and understanding in our daily lives. By illuminating our surroundings with our own unique lights, we not only honor the rich tradition of light in Judaism but also contribute to a more unified and purposeful community. In this way, we embrace the call of Chanukkah, recognizing that even in challenging times, our individual and collective lights can shine brightly, guiding us toward a better world.

## **Sustaining Faith, Lighting the Future** *The Chanukkah Flame*

**By ZACHARY FRIEDMAN, '27**

In the opening ceremony of Chanukkah, as we are about to light the candles, we recite the blessing, “בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ, מְלֶכֶּ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ, לְהַדְלִיק נֵר שֶׁל חֲנֻכָּה.” This blessing acknowledges God’s commandment to “kindle the Chanukkah candle,” with the word “נֵר” meaning “candle.” When reading closely, we see that the word for candle, נֵר, is used in its singular form. So, it is obvious that this blessing would apply to the first night of Chanukkah, when only one light, one candle is lit. However, on the subsequent nights, how can we reconcile the blessing’s reference to kindling a single “light” when we light multiple?

To answer this question, we must first revisit the basic plot of Chanukkah, as told in the *Talmud Bavli*. As the story of Chanukkah is most familiar to us, the Seleucid empire, one of the Hellenistic empires that emerged following the death of Alexander the Great, had subjugated the Land of Israel and, concomitantly, the Jewish people. During this time, the “Greeks” sought to suppress Jewish practices, instead imposing their own culture on the Jews. While Jewish acculturation to Greek influence was widespread, one small group of Jews, the Maccabees, led a revolt in which they overthrew Greek dominance. Following their victory, they rededicated the desecrated *Beit ha-Mikdash*, which had been marred by pagan practices occurring near and even in the Temple. During this process, they discovered a single, uncontaminated jug of olive oil amongst the many jugs rendered impure. Using this one jug, the Menorah was sustained for eight nights, enough time for the *kohanim* to make a new, pure batch.

From this story, we understand that the *mitzvah* of lighting the Chanukkah candles comes from the fact that one jug of uncontaminated olive oil remained available. The oil derived from an olive represents the inner contents of the olive, its essence. Paralleling the Jews’ situation to jugs of olive oil, like most of the essence of the olive was destroyed, much of the essence of the Jew was destroyed. The culture of the Jews succumbed to Greek influence, with most Jews assimilating. However, akin to the one single jug of olive oil that remained pure, one group of Jews resisted Greek domination and remained faithful to their Jewish constitution. Additionally, like that one jug that survived allowed the entire oil stock to be replenished, that one group of Jews who survived allowed for a resurgence of Judaism. Concerning the singular jug that remained, we understand that a miracle occurred to preserve this oil. But what allowed these Jews to repel Greek influence and maintain their essence?

The answer is found within the question: their essence. If a Jew believes in his or her values enough, then their values will preserve their Jewishness.

So, returning to our original question, why does the blessing maintain that we light one flame when we light multiple candles? The answer lies in the aforementioned Jewish values that kept the Jews connected. The singular flame described in the blessing represents the singular unity the Jews should possess. One flame represents one set of values, emanating from one singular God, that the Jews ought to hold by if they want to survive. So, just like the Maccabees survived and maintained their Jewish identity through a singular set of values, the way the blessing instructs Jews to preserve their Jewish identity is to unite under a single set of Jewish values. So, through this blessing, the message that can be found in Chanukkah is to maintain our Jewish values, overcome outside influences, and persevere.

This meaning of Chanukkah, as understood by this blessing, marks a shift from the surface-level commemoration of Chanukkah as a military victory. When we look past the typical celebration of our defeat of the Selueucids, we can understand what allowed us to band together and revolt in the first place: our connectedness emanating from our shared values. And if the blessing still maintains that we light a flame today, then clearly, we still must ensure unity through shared communal values.

This message is reflected in the meaning of the word *חנוכה* itself. Superficially, we break up the word *חנוכה* to mean “חנו בכ״ה,” or, “they rested on the 25<sup>th</sup>.” According to this simple interpretation, the word “חנוכה” indicates a rest from battle, which still centers the holiday around the military victory that the Jews led. However, beneath the surface, the word “חנוכה” shares the same root as the word “חינוך,” or “education.” Through this interpretation, we can understand that the real meaning of Chanukkah is to educate each other. And what should the focus of this education be? In response to that question, we refer back to the blessing, explaining that we must share communal values. So, Chanukkah sends a message that a constant transmission of Jewish values must exist from generation to generation. If we take it upon ourselves to truly animate Chanukkah’s message, the Jewish people will remain faithful to their creed, persevere through adversity, and light the world with their flame!

*Chanukkah sameach!*

## **Fighting For Fire** *Are We Thankful for War?*

By YONATAN FROMER, '27

Every year on Chanukkah, during the *Amidah* and *Birkat ha-Mazon*, we add the paragraph of *Al ha-Nissim*, followed by a short recounting of the story of Chanukkah. In the *Al ha-Nissim* paragraph, the introductory section said on Purim also, we list five things that God did for our ancestors that we are grateful for:

ועל הנסים ועל הפרקו ועל הגבורות ועל התשועות ועל המלחמות שעשיתם לאבותינו,  
בימים ההם בזמן הזה.

And for **the miracles**, and for **the redemption**, for **the mighty deeds**, for **the acts of salvation** and for **the wars** for our fathers, in those days and in this time.

We thank God for the miracles, the wonders, the mighty deeds, the salvation, and the wars that He did for our ancestors at this time in the past.

At first glance, this seems like a normal list of things that happened that we would naturally be grateful for.

But, with closer examination, the last thing on this list, thanking God for the wars, seems a little strange. Why would we want to thank God for the wars? Nobody likes wars, so why would we be grateful for the wars themselves?

Intuitively, the answer to this question might seem to be that we are thanking God for our victories in these wars, not for the wars themselves. However, this is not so plausible, because the first four things we are grateful for have to do with the victory in the war. Clearly, we are expressing gratitude for something about the war itself; therefore, there must be an aspect of the war on Chanukkah and war in general that we are and should be grateful for.

While the war of Chanukkah happened because the Greeks threatened the Jews, the war itself stemmed from the Greeks' desire to get rid of our culture, to end Judaism as a religion. When the Greeks tried to take away their *mitzvot*, the Jews realized how much they appreciated God's commandments and wanted to fight for their ability to abide by and practice them.

We are grateful not for the war in the sense that it was a deadly fight with the Greeks; rather, we acknowledge that through this battle and the need to protect our culture, the Jews came to appreciate what Torah and Judaism meant to them.

There is a clear connection here to the time we are living in right now. Israel is currently fighting enemies on multiple fronts, all of whom have the goal to destroy the

Jews. Again, while no one wants to fight these wars, there is a powerful idea of standing strong together to fight for what you believe in.

We, as Jews living in this time of war, need to come together and do our part to help fight for our religion and values, especially because there have been times in history where Jews didn't have the ability to practice Judaism like we do. We cannot forget to appreciate the amazing opportunity that we have been given, a Jewish State of Israel and overall acceptance of Jews worldwide is not something to take for granted. However, in the past year or so, these privileges have been challenged over and over again, and so we are charged with continuing the everlasting fight to continue Jewish tradition.

This all connects to the idea of lighting Chanukkah candles, too. Following their miraculous victory in the war, the first thing that the Jews did was search for a jug of oil to light the Menorah in the Beit ha-Mikdash. They only found enough to light for one day, and yet, the oil lasted for eight days. And so therefore we light on Chanukkah to publicize this miracle; that of oil and fire lasting even when it shouldn't.

But what is the significance and connection of this dual miracle — the victory in the war and the oil that lasted for eight days?

Throughout history, our enemies are always trying to wipe us out and stop us from passing on our Judaism and Torah. And yet Judaism is the only Semitic nation to last from ancient times to modern times. There have been nations that were far greater and more powerful than the Jews, but none of them have survived for as long as Judaism has.

In fact, the miracles of the story of Chanukkah are actually a microcosm of what Jewish history has been and continues to be in the present day.

Both of these miracles are the continuation of a fire. In the Beit ha-Mikdash, the flame lasted for eight days, a lot longer than it was supposed to. And in our military and cultural victory, our internal flame burned within us despite the Greeks trying to kill us.

Being a Jew means fighting for our fire even when all our enemies want to put it out. And in the end, with the help of Hashem, when we inevitably always win, we are tasked with displaying that fire to the rest of the world, just like on Chanukkah.

There is a famous concept in Judaism that comes from the following *pasuk* in *Yeshayahu*. In 49:6 it says: “וַיִּתְּתֶיךָ לְאוֹר גּוֹיִם, לְהִיּוֹת יְשׁוּעָתִי עַד-קְצֵה הָאָרֶץ:” - “And I will give you *le-or goyim*, that my deliverance may extend to the ends of the earth.” This *pasuk* is generally understood to mean that we, as the Jewish people, will be a light (*or*) unto the other nations, being the gold standard of moral conduct.

However, in the context of all the ideas relating to the Chanukkah miracles, it seems to be saying that God will gift us the everlasting light of our nation, and we need to make sure that God's salvation which allows us to have this light is known among all the nations. That is precisely why we light candles on Chanukkah, to publicize the miracle of God's salvation of the Jewish people.

And because this fire will continue forever, we need to be grateful for the opportunity to defend the fire of the Jewish people. That is why we thank God for the wars in *Al ha-Nissim*; because we are and always have been given the opportunity to defend the very essence of who we are and appreciate the Mitzvot and Torah that God gave us.

The same idea is true for us — we have been blessed to live in a time where it is easier than ever to be a Jew, but recently that has been threatened. We must continue the fight for our everlasting fire, for our everlasting Jewish identity.

## ***Pirsumei Nissa'*** *For Others and Ourselves*

By AMALIA GERBER, '27

A major aspect behind the lighting of Chanukkah candles is the *mitzvah* of *Pirsumei Nissa'*, which means publicizing the miracle of Chanukkah to the wider, even non-Jewish, community. To fulfill this *mitzvah*, we usually place our *chanukiyot* in a visible spot near a doorway or window so passerby may see the light of the candles. This *mitzvah* is a well-known aspect of Chanukkah. However, less well known is the fact that we are also obligated in this *mitzvah* on Purim and Pesach. In order to fully understand the parameters of *Pirsumei Nissa'* on Chanukkah, I think we first have to take a look at the other times we have an obligation in this *mitzvah*.

On Purim, the *mitzvah* of *Pirsumei Nissa'* is brought up in the Gemara with regard to the reading of the *Megillah*. The Gemara in *Megillah* states that someone who does not understand the original, untranslated language of *Megillat Esther* can still fulfill his obligation. Ravina says that this obligation that is fulfilled is both the *mitzvah* of reading the *Megillah* and of *Pirsumei Nissa'* (*Megillah* 18a). From Ravina's statement, we understand that in the *mitzvah* of reading the *Megillah*, there is an element of *Pirsumei Nissa'*.

On Pesach, even the poorest person in all of Israel must do everything possible to acquire four cups of wine (*Mishnah Pesachim* 10:1). We see this same stringency with regards to Chanukkah. The *Maggid Mishneh* says that the reason for this shared stringency is because the two holidays share the *mitzvah* of *Pirsumei Nissa'* and publicizing the miracle is so important, that even the poorest person must fulfill the *mitzvot* (*Maggid Mishneh, Hilkhos Chanukkah* 4:12).

Interestingly, on both Purim and Pesach, the *mitzvah* of *Pirsumei Nissa'* seems a lot less public than on Chanukkah. While on Chanukkah we put the candles in our windows, or even outside our homes, on Purim and Pesach we simply publicize the *mitzvah* internally, amongst and to other Jews. We read the *Megillah* in our homes or shuls and drink the four cups just with the people at our Pesach *Seder*.

Not only does the *mitzvah* of *Pirsumei Nissa'* seem more public on Chanukkah, the obligation in it may even apply to non-Jews. The Gemara in *Shabbat* says that we can light candles “דְּכַלְיָא רִיגְלָא דְּתַרְמוּדָאִי” - “Until the traffic of the people of Tadmor [*tarmoda'ei*] ceases” (*Shabbat* 21a). It seems that the reason one can only light until then is because there needs to be people around to see your candles to fulfill *Pirsumei Nissa'*.

According to Rashi, the *Tarmoda'ei* were a nation of people who sold wood. They would stay late in the marketplace so that when people's fires went out, they could buy wood from these sellers (commentary on *Shabbat* 21a, s.v. “דְּרִגְלָא דְּתַרְמוּדָאִי”). Rashi seems

to be saying that the *Tarmoda'ei* were a nation of non-Jews, implying that the fulfillment of *Pirsumei Nissa'* is not limited to Jews being made aware of the miracle. One could argue that Rashi is not saying that *Pirsumei Nissa'* applies for non-Jews but rather just that if the *Tarmoda'ei* are still in the marketplace, there are likely still Jewish buyers around who will see the candles. This seems like a relatively weak argument though, especially considering that there is other proof of the *mitzvah* applying to non-Jews.

In the paragraph of *Al ha-Nissim* we say, “וַיְהִי עֲשֵׂיתָ שֵׁם גָּדוֹל וְקָדוֹשׁ בְּעוֹלָמְךָ” - “and for Yourself, You have made a great and holy name in Your world.” “Your world” seems to imply that we have to publicize *Hashem's* name, His miracles and reputation, throughout the entire world, including Jews and non-Jews.

It is clear that this *mitzvah* is different on Chanukkah than on Purim and Pesach, where *Pirsumei Nissa'* is much more private and not publicized to non-Jews. Why is this? Rav Soloveitchik offered a very interesting explanation. He said that on Purim and Pesach, Jews fought for their physical survival, whereas on Chanukkah, they were fighting for their spiritual survival. The Greeks were trying to force Hellenism upon them. On Purim and Pesach, we don't have to publicize *Hashem's* miracles to gentiles because, like everyone else, Jews of course have an instinct to fight for their physical existence. Chanukkah is different because we have to show to gentiles that Jews don't only fight for their physical existence, they also fight for their spiritual survival.<sup>1</sup>

While Chanukkah has this element of publicity towards non-Jews, which Pesach and Purim don't, Chanukkah also has an aspect of *Pirsumei Nissa'* more private or personal in nature. We see this in a question that comes up among the *Rishonim*: If someone lives all alone and there is nobody around to see their candles, should they still light with a *brakhah*?

The *Shulchan Arukh* writes that in a place where there is nobody to see the candles, one should still light with a *bracha*. The Rema explains that this is because you have an obligation to see the lights, even if no one else will. The Rema adds that in a case where there are Jews around and you will see their lights, you don't have to light your own candles at all. However, if you want to be stringent, you should light the candles yourself and make a *brakhah* (*Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chaim* 677:3).

From the *Shulchan Arukh* and Rema, we can understand the personal value of lighting the Chanukkah candles. Even in a place where there will be no *Pirsumei Nissa'*, publicizing the *mitzvah* to others, one is supposed to light the candles for themselves because of the importance of seeing the light. In addition to seeing the light, the Rema is teaching us that there is an inherent value in lighting the *chanukkiyah* ourselves.

I think this idea that we light with a *brakhah* even when nobody else will see the lights is telling us something about the nature of *Pirsumei Nissa'*. The *Pirsumei Nissa'* of

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “Reflections on Maimonides' Laws of Hanukkah,” in *Days of Deliverance: Essays on Purim and Hanukkah*, ed. Eli D. Clark, Joel B. Wolowelsky, and Reuven Ziegler, *MeOtzar HoRav* 8 (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV, 2007), p. 199 (whole essay: pp. 167-200).



Chanukkah, like Purim and Pesach, is also a *mitzvah* towards ourselves. When we light Chanukkah candles, even if nobody sees them, we are making a statement of pride. We are making a statement that we have full trust in *Hashem* to save us, both physically and spiritually. The idea of *Pirsumei Nissa*' is not just about publicizing this to people around us, but also to ourselves.

The *Pirsumei Nissa*' of Chanukkah is unique. Like Purim and Pesach, lighting candles has an internal importance. But Chanukkah is special in that it has an added element of publicizing the light to the entire world. This external publicity begins with our own internal conviction. The *chanukiyah* in the window or outside our homes gives a message to the entire world, but it is our personal faith that fuels this light. Chanukkah challenges us to embrace both dimensions of *Pirsumei Nissa*'. We have to unite our private devotion with our public mission to share *Hashem*'s light and our nation's ability to fight for our physical and spiritual existence.

## **Shining Light on Fire** *Examining Fire in the Torah and Rabbinic Sources*

By **DANIELA GRIBETZ, '27**

From the miracle of oil during the period of the Chashmonaim, to our modern-day *chanukkiyot*, Chanukkah has always been a holiday of fire.

The very nature of fire is curious. Fire is an essential part of the human experience; for thousands of years, fire has aided humans in many of our basic functions: cooking, seeing, and keeping warm. But fire also has menacing capabilities. Flames of warmth and light can quickly become destructive.

As I sit and write, a thick smoke plume sits outside my apartment. A forest fire blazes across the Hudson River, and the winds have brought the smoke all the way to Riverdale. I feel it with my lungs. I smell it when I step outside. Suddenly, the mystery of fire is not a distant thought; it is a reality.

The Tri-State Area has been engulfed in a drought, triggered by unusually persistent high pressure over the region and aggravated by climate change. On November 5<sup>th</sup>, Mayor Eric Adams of New York City declared a drought watch. On November 13<sup>th</sup>, Governor Phil Murphy of New Jersey announced a more urgent drought warning. Brush fires fueled by dry soil, high winds, and low humidity have consumed the region.

The Torah and rabbinic literature share numerous insights about fire and provide a helpful framework to navigate the topic.

We are introduced to the concept of fire in *Bereshit*, at the Covenant of the Pieces:

וַיְהִי הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ בָּאָה וְעָלְטָה הַיָּה, וַהֲנִיחַ תְּנוּרַת עֵשֶׂן וְלֶפֶיד אֵשׁ אֲשֶׁר עָבַר בֵּין הַגְּזָרִים הָאֵלֶּה:

When the sun set and it was very dark, there appeared a smoking oven, and a flaming torch which passed between those pieces. (*Bereshit* 15:17; all biblical translations are that of the NJPS with minor alterations)

According to the 12<sup>th</sup> century French commentator, Yosef Bekhor Shor, the oven and torch symbolize God's Divine Presence. He explains:

זהו השכינה שבאה לכרות ברית וגלה לו הזמן והדור והעמים שירש:

And here is a smoking oven and a flaming torch: this is the [Divine] Presence that comes to forge a covenant and it reveals to him [Avraham] the time, the generation, and the nations that he will inherit. (Bekhor Shor, commentary on *Bereshit* 15:17, s.v. “והנה תנור עשן ולפיד אש”)

God appears through fire elsewhere in Tanakh. In *Devarim* 5, we are told that God spoke through fire to the Children of Israel at *Har Sinai*: “פְּנִים בְּפְנִים דִּבֶּר יְ-הוָה עִמָּכֶם בְּהָר־” - “Face to face *HASHEM* spoke to you on the mountain out of the fire” (*Devarim* 5:4).

*Hashem* uses fire not only to form covenants, but also to protect *Bnei Yisrael*. While the Children of Israel traveled through the wilderness, God safeguarded the nation through a pillar of fire. *Shemot* 13:22 recalls: “לֹא־יָמִישׁ עַמּוּד הָעָנָן יוֹמָם וְעַמּוּד הָאֵשׁ לַיְלָה” - “The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.”

These three verses present a single paradigm: fire radiates God’s presence. Furthermore, they appear in noteworthy contexts: God’s promise to create an Abrahamic nation through the Covenant of the Pieces, God’s protection in the desert, and God’s revelation to the Children of Israel at Mount Sinai. Each story is central to the trajectory of the Jewish people.

Yet fire also stops us in our tracks; it makes us wonder what is going on. We see this in two instances, with Avraham and with Moshe. *Bereshit Rabbah* 39:1 teaches how Avraham found God through an analogy:

מִשָּׁל לְאַחַד שֶׁהָיָה עוֹבֵר מִמְּקוֹם לְמְקוֹם, וְרָאָה בֵּינָה אֶחָת דּוֹלֶקֶת. אָמַר: “תֹּאמֶר שֶׁהַבֵּינָה הַזֹּאת בְּלֹא מְנַהֵיג?” הִצִּיץ עָלָיו בַּעַל הַבֵּינָה, אָמַר לוֹ: “אֲנִי הוּא בַּעַל הַבֵּינָה.” כִּי, לְפִי שֶׁהָיָה אֲבִינוּ אֲבָרָהָם אוֹמֵר: “תֹּאמֶר שֶׁהָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה בְּלֹא מְנַהֵיג?” הִצִּיץ עָלָיו הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא וְאָמַר לוֹ: “אֲנִי הוּא בַּעַל הָעוֹלָם.” “וַיִּתְאַוּ הַמֶּלֶךְ יִפְתָּח כִּי הוּא אֲדֹנָיָה” (תהי מה:יב). “וַיִּתְאַוּ הַמֶּלֶךְ יִפְתָּח, לְיַפְתָּח בְּעוֹלָם, וַיִּהְיֶה שְׂתָחוּ לוֹ” (שם), הָיָה “וַיֹּאמֶר ה’ אֶל אֲבָרָם” (בר’ יב:א).

This is analogous to one who was passing from place to place, and saw a burning building. He said: ‘Is it possible that this building has no one in charge of it?’ The owner of the building looked out at him and said: ‘I am the owner of the building.’ So, because Avraham our patriarch was saying: ‘Is it possible that this world is without someone in charge?’ The Holy One blessed be He looked at him and said to him: ‘I am the owner of the world.’ “The king will desire your beauty, as he is your master” (Psalms 45:12) – to show your beauty in the world. “And bow to him” (Psalms 45:12) – that is, “the Lord said to Abram.”<sup>2</sup>

According to this *midrash*, a burning building, or castle, prompted Avraham to find God. This *midrash* is figurative. The castle represents the earth and the flames are

<sup>2</sup> This translation is based on *The Sefaria Midrash Rabbah*, 2022, and includes a number of alterations.

flames of evil.<sup>3</sup> Metaphorical flames and smoke led Avraham to wonder aloud whether the world has an owner. The *midrash* implies that Avraham's encounter with the burning house eventually led him to recognize God as possessor of the universe.

Just like Avraham, Moshe first finds God through fire, at the unusual scene of a burning bush:

וַיֵּרָא מִלְאָךְ יְ-הוָה אֵלָיו בְּלַבַּת־אֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסֵּנֶה, וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה הַסֵּנֶה בֵּיעַר בְּאֵשׁ וְהַסֵּנֶה אֵינּוּ אֹכֵל:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶסְתֵּה־נָּא וְאַרְאֵה אֶת־הַמַּרְאֶה הַגָּדֹל הַזֶּה מִדּוּעַ לֹא־יִבְעַר הַסֵּנֶה:

A messenger of *HASHEM* appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. Moshe said, "I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?" (*Shemot* 3:4)

These texts teach us an additional aspect of fire: the sight of fire signals urgency, teaches us to notice our surroundings and question what is happening. The Torah chooses attentive leaders who pay attention to fire and act when they see it. When Avraham sees fire, he immediately wonders who the owner of the castle is. When Moshe comes upon a burning bush, he immediately inquires into its source.

Fire is not always destructive. As these sources demonstrate, fire can also represent God's radiance and serve as a warning or a way to get our attention.

There's an additional dimension associated with fire, which *Masekhet Derekh Eretz Zuta* recalls:

אמר בר קפרא: גדול הוא השלום, שהמלאכים אין ביניהם לא איבה ולא קנאה ולא שנאה ולא מינות ולא תגרות ולא מחלוקת שהקב"ה עושה עמהן שלום. מה טעם "המשל" ופחד עמו עושה שלום במרומיו" (איוב כה:ב). "המשל" זה מיכאל. ופחד זה גבריאל. לא זה מחזיק את זה. ומהן מן אש ומהן מן מים. בני אדם שיש ביניהן כל המדות האלו על אחת כמה וכמה.

Bar Kappara said: Great is peace, for even the angels among whom there is no enmity, jealousy, hatred, strife, rivalry or dissension [have need for] the Holy One, blessed be He, to make peace among them; as it is stated, Dominion and fear are with Him; He makes peace in His high places – dominion alludes to Michael and *fear* to Gavriel, one being of fire and the other of water and yet they do not injure one another; how much more so then do mortal beings, among whom all these dispositions exist, [have need of peace]! (*Perek ha-Shalom* §2)

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<sup>3</sup> The meaning of the phrase "בירה דולקת" is ambiguous, and the definition here is just one of many interpretations. An article by the *Rosh Yeshivah* of Yeshivat Sha'alavim, Rav Michael Yammer, explains the possible definitions. See R. Yammer, "Parshat Lekh-Lekha: Birah Doleket," *Yeshivat Sha'alvim*, online at <http://shaalvim.co.il/torah/view.asp?id=683>.

Bar Kappara teaches that the angels Michael and Gavriel represent fire and water, respectively. He asks: If these two angles, who have completely contradicting characteristics, can coexist, should not humans also be able to live together in peace? In Judaism, fire does not only radiate God's presence, protect, and serve as a call for action; it is also used to teach the importance of peace.

Every Chanukkah we are obligated to light candles. This Chanukkah, as we strike our matches and light our chanukiot, let the flames illuminate our homes with Torah, protect us from evil, and inspire us to pursue peace.



על "ניסים"  
מסר לתקופתנו

By SOPHIE GRIBETZ, '27

מְרַחֵק כֹּל דְבַר נִרְאֶה נִס  
אֶבֶל מְקָרֹב גַּם נִס לֹא נִרְאֶה כֵּן.  
אֶפְלוּ מִי שֶׁעָבַר בֵּינָם-סוּף בְּקִיעַת הַיָּם  
רָאָה רַק אֶת הַגֵּב הַמְזִיעַ שֶׁל הַהוֹלֵךְ לְפָנָיו  
וְאֵת נוֹעַ יְרֻכָיו הַגְּדוֹלוֹת. (יהודה עמיחי, "ניסים")

השיר "ניסים" מאת יהודה עמיחי מנתח את הרעיון והמשמעות של ניסים, וגם איך שאנחנו מתייחסים אליהם. השיר בהשראת פרשת בשלח, שמספר על קריעת ים-סוף.<sup>4</sup> בפתחת השיר עמיחי טוען שמרחוק הכל נראה ניסי, אבל מקרוב — אפילו משהו שבאמת ניסי — לא נראה כך. המילה "מרחוק" מתכוונת ליחס הפיזי שהיה לבן אדם לנס שקרה.

המרחק גם מסמל רעיון יותר רחב: פרספקטיבה. עמיחי מזכיר לנו שכשאנחנו מסתכלים אחורה בזמן, שאנחנו רחוקים באופן מטאפורית מהנס ולכן זה יותר קל להבחין. אנחנו מסוגלים להרכיב משקפיים ורודים ואפילו 'להמציא' ניסים שלא קיימים. אבל, כשאנחנו קרובים לנס — כשזה קורה לנו עכשיו, בהווה — זה כמעט בלתי אפשרי להעריך את הפלאות של הטבע ושל הקב"ה.

עמיחי גם בוחן את המהות של נס. ניסים הם בכל מקום. ניסים הם המזל שיש לנו, הגוף שלנו שמאפשר לנו לחיות, התפילות שלנו שבסוף מתגשמות, והאהבה שיש לנו אחד כלפי השני. עמיחי מציין שזה עצוב שאנחנו לא מודעים לטוב שיש בעולם. אנחנו אפילו לא מבחינים את הניסים העל-טבעיים האמיתיים! השיר מבוסס על סיפור קריעת ים סוף, כשבני ישראל העידו לנפלאות של ה'. עמיחי מניח שכאשר בני חצו את הים ביבשה, הם אפילו לא ידעו שהם הולכים בתוך ים כי הם רק ראו "אֶת הַגֵּב הַמְזִיעַ שֶׁל הַהוֹלֵךְ לְפָנָיו וְאֵת נוֹעַ יְרֻכָיו הַגְּדוֹלוֹת." אחרי שהם יצאו מהים, הם הבינו את עוצמת הנס ואז שרו בהודיה ושבח. אני תוהה על המשמעות של השורש "ראה" בשיר. עמיחי טוען בחשיבות האמונה, העדות, והראיה בנס ולא במציאות. הוא גורם לנו לחשוב על המהות והגדרת נס. עמיחי מציע שניסים הם רק שווים כי אנחנו מחליטים שהם ברכות מה'.

בחנוכה, אנחנו חוגגים שני ניסים: נס פך השמן ונס ניצחון המכבים. אחרי שקראתי את השיר עלו לי כמה שאלות על ניסי חנוכה ואיך אנחנו כעם וקהילה מתייחסים אליהם. זה נס שפך שמן זעיר הצליח להדליק אש לשמונה ימים! אבל ניצחון המכבים גם היה נס קריטי להישרדות של היהודים. אנחנו צריכים לזכור את שניהם.

חשוב לציין שאנחנו, היום, חוגגים ניסים "מרחוק", אלפי שנים מאז האירועים של חנוכה. יכול להיות שהניסים שאנחנו זוכרים ושחשובים לנו הם שונים מהדברים שהיהודים בזמן המכבים והחשמונאים הגדירו כנסים. יש לנו את הזכות להסתכל אחורה ולחגוג כל מיני ניסים אפילו אם האנשים שחוו אותם לא הבחינו.

<sup>4</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/3ht7u5pd>.

עמיחי גם מזכיר לנו שאנחנו צריכים להסתכל סביבנו ולהבחין את הניסים של היום. לא כדאי לפספס ניסים. עכשיו, כשהעם שלנו בזמן מצוקה וכאב ומלחמה אנחנו עדיין צריכים לנסות לזכור ולהודות על הניסים של העבר ושל ההווה. אנחנו במיוחד צריכים למצוא את הניסים הנסתרים שסביבנו תמיד. בעתיד, נחגוג גם אותם.

## illuminating Obligation

### A Deep Dive into Women's Obligation in Lighting on Chanukkah

By HADAR GRONER, '26

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi explains women's obligation to light Chanukkah candles as follows: “שָׂאָף הֵן הָיוּ בְּאוֹתוֹ הַנִּס” - “As Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Women are obligated in lighting the Chanukkah light, as they too were included in that miracle” (*Shabbat* 23a).

The same wording used by Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi — “שָׂאָף הֵן הָיוּ בְּאוֹתוֹ הַנִּס” — interestingly appear in two other places: *Megillah* 4a and *Pesachim* 108a-b. These *sugyot* discuss women's obligations in two other *mitzvot*: reading the *Megillah* and drinking four cups at the *Seder*, respectively. What is the connection between these three *mitzvot* that they all have the same principle — that women are obligated in them because they, too, were included in the miracle? And what does the Gemara mean by that phrase in the context of the *mitzvah* of Chanukkah candles?

Rashi tries to connect these three *mitzvot* by pointing out that in all three situations, women had an active role in saving the Jewish people. Rashi states, regarding women's obligation in drinking four cups at the *Seder*:

כדאמרין, “בשכר נשים צדקניות שבאותו הדור נגאלו” (סוטה יא:), וכן גבי מקרא מגילה,  
נמי אמרינן הכי, דמשום דעל ידי אסתר נגאלו, וכן גבי נר חנוכה במסכת שבת (כג.).

As it says (*Sotah* 11b), “They were redeemed in the merit of righteous women of that generation”; and we also say this regarding *Megillah* reading, since they were redeemed through Esther. So, too, regarding Chanukkah candles, in *Masekhet Shabbat* (23a). (Rashi on *Pesachim* 108b, s.v. “שָׂאָף הֵן הָיוּ בְּאוֹתוֹ הַנִּס”)

Rashi claims that the Jewish people were saved on Pesach because of the “righteous women of that generation,” referencing a *midrash* that loosely connects women to the redemption from Egypt (see, e.g., *Sotah* 12a). While Rashi is unclear which “righteous women” he is referring to, he could be referencing any of the many women present in the Pesach story: Miriam, Yocheved, the midwives, or even Bat Paraoth. A stronger example is how Rashi points to Esther as a clear hero in the Purim story. Because Esther played such an active role in defeating Haman and saving the Jewish people from extinction, it is only right that all women should have an active role in hearing and reading the *Megillah* on Purim today. Since this makes sense, Rashi (in *Shabbat*) attempts to apply this same idea of a female heroine to the Chanukkah story, commenting: “שגזרו יוונים על כל בתולות הנשואות להיבעל לטפסר תחלה ועל יד אשה נעשה הנס” - “For the Greeks decreed that all virgin brides be bedded first by the commander, and the



miracle was performed through a woman” (Rashi on *Shabbat* 23a, s.v. “היו באותו הנס”). Tosafot (on *Pesachim* 108b, s.v. “היו באותו הנס”) mentions that the Rashbam clarifies that when Rashi refers to the miracle of Chanukkah being “performed by a woman,” he is making a reference to Yehudit. Yehudit is the protagonist in the Apocryphal *Sefer Yehudit*, who seduced and killed the Assyrian general, thereby saving the Jewish people from their enemies. However, this example is weak; Rashi does not even mention Yehudit by name, and her story is not canonical to the regular Chanukkah story found in the Gemara. It’s a little bit of a stretch to say that she is responsible for the Chanukkah miracle in the same way that Esther is responsible for the Purim miracle. So, another approach to explaining the meaning of “שָׂאֵף הֵן הָיוּ בְּאוֹתוֹ הַנֶּסֶם” in the context of Chanukkah may work better.

Rejecting Rashi’s answer, Tosafot (on *Megillah* 4a, s.v. “שָׂאֵף הֵן הָיוּ בְּאוֹתוֹ הַנֶּסֶם”) offer a different explanation — it is not because a specific woman saved the Jewish people, but because women were clearly included in the saving. Tosafot interpret the Gemara’s use of the word “אָף” in *Shabbat* 23a as a means to emphasize how women “too” were included in the saving — meaning everyone was saved, even the women. (If Rashi’s interpretation were right, then the Gemara should have said that women are obligated because they *did* the saving.) While women were not primarily responsible for making the miracle occur, they went through the same experiences as the men and were equally saved. Tosafot support this claim by citing the *Yerushalmi*, which states that women faced the same “*safek*” - uncertainty - and anguish that led to the miracle:

בר קפרא אמ[ר]: צריך לקרותה לפני נשים...שאף אותם היו בספק.  
Bar Kappara said: “It is necessary to read [Megillah] for women...for they, too, were subject to the uncertainty.” (*Yerushalmi Megillah* 2:5)

Therefore, women must be obligated in these commemorative *mitzvot* since they experienced the same harsh circumstances at the time of these stories.

While this may be true, why does this principle not apply to all *mitzvot* based on miracles? Were women not there in all the other instances where *Hashem* saved the Jewish people? What is so special about these specific three *mitzvot* — drinking four cups at the *Seder*, reading Megillah, and, of course, lighting Chanukkah candles — that the Gemara goes out of its way to say that women are obligated in these miracle-based *mitzvot*?

Tosafot (on *Pesachim* 108b, s.v. “היו באותו הנס”) suggest that the commonality between these *mitzvot* is that they are all purely rabbinic obligations. But that answer still feels unsatisfying. Rabbi Soloveitchik, picking up on this, adds to Tosafot’s answer, reminding us of what we are even fulfilling when we light Chanukkah candles.<sup>5</sup> We light

<sup>5</sup> R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Iggerot ha-Grid ha-Levi* (Jerusalem: Morasha Foundation, 2001), on *Hilkhot Chanukkah* 4:9-11, pp. 91-92.

candles not just to commemorate the saving for ourselves, but to also publicize our remembrance of this miracle — the principle of “פְּרִסוּמֵי נִסִּים.” To fulfill the lighting of candles completely, we must be public with our acknowledgment of this miracle. Practically, we fulfill the publicizing aspect of the *mitzvah* when we say the *brakhah* of “*she-asah nissim*” — which we do both when lighting candles and when reading the Megillah. While we don’t say “*she-asah nissim*” before drinking the four cups, the principle of *Pirsumei Nissa*’ applies to that *mitzvah* as well; the Geonim tell us that the *brakhah* of “*asher ge’alanu*,” which say at the *Seder*, serves practically the same purpose as “*she-asah nissim*.”<sup>6</sup> All three of these *mitzvot* are linked by something much more specific than being rabbinic; they are linked by the fact that they are all only fulfilled if one publicizes their remembrance of the miracle. It is not enough to remember the miracle; we must show others that we remember it as well. When one fulfills an ordinary *mitzvah*, they simply have to do the action, but these three examples all show that publicizing the *mitzvah* is crucial to its fulfillment. And when it comes to publicizing, we need all hands on deck — the more people who can spread the miracle, the better.

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<sup>6</sup> See R. Mayer Lichtenstein, “Af Hein Hayu Be-oto Ha-nes (Part 1),” trans. David Silverberg, *Virtual Beit Midrash, Har Etzion*, December 25, 2016, at <https://tinyurl.com/3v79kv4c>.

## Among the Nations — and Apart

### *Are the Faithful Meant to Be Alone? Two Models of Faithful Living*

By NATE HAIN, '25

After he is flogged in the *Beit ha-Mikdash* by the *kohen* Pashchur, Yirmiyahu, in one of the most striking complaints recorded against *Hashem* in the entire Tanakh, filled with indignation and anger, daringly and defiantly calls out to God (*Yirmiyahu* 20:7-18). Among his many remarkable grievances, I have always been particularly struck by the isolation and betrayal Yirmiyahu expresses: “...הַגִּידוּ וְנִגְדְּנוּ, מִגּוֹר מִסָּבִיב, כִּי שָׁמַעְתִּי דְבַת רַבִּים, כִּלְעֵי צְלָעַי” - “For I have heard the whispering of many, terror on every side: ‘Denounce, and we will denounce him’; even of all my familiar friends [are among] them that watch for my halting...” (20:10; OJPS). For his service to *Hashem*, for following His every command, Yirmiyahu is betrayed by his closest friends, literally, “my people of well-being [*shalom*].”

Is this what God wants? Are we, men and women of faith, supposed to be, meant to be, alone and isolated, betrayed by even our closest of friends and allies?<sup>7</sup>

It can certainly feel that way, especially in times like ours. For our fidelity and fealty to *Hashem*, we receive the promise of *sechar* (reward) — and a complete and total loneliness. We walk through Manhattan or sit on subways, painfully conscious of our unique identity as Jews, *kippot*-like burning targets on our heads. We walk into *shul* past patrol cars, there to protect us from a hostile world. We watch the news and wonder if everyone, in truth, hates us.

#### I. *Loneliness in Biblical Texts*

“וְאַתָּה אֲנִי לְבַדִּי” - “And I remain alone” (*Melakhim Aleph* 19:14): These are Eliyahu’s haunting words, leveled to God at Chorev (Sinai). Eliyahu, failing to redeem his people and declared an enemy of the state (19:1), flees the idolatrous Northern Kingdom of Israel for the wilderness.

It matters not whether this statement is, in reality, true; it doesn’t matter if Eliyahu is actually alone. In fact, we know he’s not (19:18).<sup>8</sup> What matters is that Eliyahu’s *experience* is one of utter, total aloneness. He *feels* alone. The word “*ani*” - “I” - is redundant in this sentence. Eliyahu could have just said “וְאַתָּה לְבַדִּי” and his words

<sup>7</sup> The loneliness I describe in this article is of a more concrete, literal nature — i.e., being or feeling alone. The Rav spoke of an introspective and mystically ontological loneliness. See R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (1965; repr., New York, NY: Three Leaves Press, 2006), pp. 3-4; see also *ibid.*, p. 101).

<sup>8</sup> J. Richard Middleton, *Abraham’s Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), p. 61.

would have the same exact meaning: “And I remain alone.” But Eliyahu’s “*ani*” serves to emphasize his loneliness, heightening his feeling: “And I remain, *me*, alone.”

Eliyahu and Yirmiyahu are hardly the only men to express this feeling in the Tanakh, to feel isolated and desolate of companionship. In ch. 38 of *Sefer Tehillim*, for instance, the psalmist describes his lonely state. “My friends and companions,” he says, “stand back from my affliction; / my kinsman stand far off” (v. 12; NJPS). Even the most beloved of friends and closest of family members — even parents (see *Tehillim* 27:10) — can and do leave those faithful to *Hashem*. God, however, “will [always] take me in” (27:10; NJPS).

In ch. 25 of *Tehillim*, the psalmist complains of being alone, cut-off: “יָהִיד וְעָנִי אָנִי” - “I am solitary and afflicted” (v. 16). Note how “יָהִיד וְעָנִי אָנִי” rhymes. (Indeed, to our 21<sup>st</sup> century ears, with our modern pronunciation of the *ayin*, the words are practically identical.) Perhaps the rhyming of “I, myself” and “affliction, destitution” is meant to suggest that the psalmist’s very essence, his self (“me”), is pain and hardship. When he says “me,” when he thinks of himself, he might as well just say pain and hardship. Who he is and the experience of affliction are one and the same thing, inextricably linked.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps no psalm encapsulates the loneliness of the faithful better than ch. 88. This psalm is one of the darkest in all of *Sefer Tehillim*, one of the only “complaint psalms” to conclude without a doxology or declaration of faith, i.e., devoid of any comfort.<sup>10</sup> In this most dark of poems, the psalmist twice calls out to God expressing his unbearable loneliness:

הֲרַחֵקַת מִדַּעִי מִמֶּנִּי, שְׁתַּנִּי תוֹעֵבוֹת לְמוֹ; כָּלָא וְלֹא אֵצְא: ... הֲרַחֵקַת מִמֶּנִּי אֱהָב וְרַע, מִדַּעִי  
מִתְּשָׁרָד:

You have taken my friends from me.  
You have made me an abomination to them.  
I am confined, and I can't escape....  
You have put lover and friend far from me,

<sup>9</sup> While, as James Kugel notes, the elaborate biblical rhyme schemes constructed by 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars are completely unfounded (Kugel, “On the Bible and Literary Criticism,” *Prooftexts* 1, no. 3 (September 1981): pp. 217-236), many academics concede that the Bible makes use of spontaneous and sporadic rhymes and sound play for emphatic effect or simply phonetic aesthetics. See, e.g., Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004), pp. 200-218, esp. 201-203; Wilfred G.E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (1984; repr., Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004), pp. 231-233. See also Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1987), p. 53; Luis Alonso Schökel, “Isaiah,” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1990), pp. 167, 170 (whole chapter: pp. 165-183); James G. Williams, “Proverbs and Ecclesiastes,” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, p. 271 (whole chapter: pp. 263-282).

<sup>10</sup> The psalm is also unusual in that there are very few, if any, explicit requests made by the psalmist. It is almost as if the psalmist is so devoid of hope, he cannot even imagine or pray for a better future; all he can do is call out to God, not in prayer, but in despair. Amos Hakham did write that “אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׁוֹעָתִי” - “God of my deliverance” - in v. 2 “is an allusion to the fact that [the psalmist’s] request is for God to deliver him” (Hakham, *Sefer Tehillim*, vol. 2, Books 3-5, Psalms 73-150, *Da’at Mikra* [Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1989], commentary on 88:2, p. 128; my translation).

and my friends into darkness. (*Tehillim* 88:9, 19; World English Bible [vv. 8, 18])

Not only is the author of this psalm alone,<sup>11</sup> but he is alone *because of God*: “You have taken.... You have made.... You have put...[the suffix “ָ”].” The *mishorer’s* sense of loneliness extends to an alienation and isolation from God, as Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger, Jr., have noted:

These verses in fact accuse [God] of infidelity and of betraying the trust and confidence of the psalmist. Thus, the speaker grieves over not only a *threat* to life but a sense of *abandonment* by the very one on whom he counted.<sup>12</sup> (no emphasis added)

The psalmist is deprived not only of human connection but feels abandoned by God Himself. Further, a number of commentators (e.g., Radak, Sforno; see their respective commentaries on *Tehillim* 88:1) read *perek* 88 as a psalm about the whole nation of Israel, specifically during the time of exile. If this is the case, not only are individual men and women of faith alone, the faithful *nation* is alone, “like a lonely bird on a rooftop” (*Tehillim* 102:8; see Ibn Ezra B., Radak, Rashi, and more on 102:1, who identify the psalm as speaking of the *nation* of Israel).<sup>13</sup> The man of faith is a lonely bird, devoid of companions, and perhaps even devoid of any feelings of Divine presence.<sup>14</sup>

## II. *The First Righteous Man: Noah*

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<sup>11</sup> It is notable that in a psalm so dark and preoccupied with death and bodily harm (*Tehillim* 88:4-8, 10-18), the psalmist’s complaint climaxes in despair *over isolation and loneliness* (vv. 9, 19). Robert Alter writes of Psalm 88,

What distinguishes this particular supplication is its special concentration on the terrifying darkness of the realm of death that has almost engulfed the supplicant. In consonance with this focus, the psalm deploys an unusual abundance of synonyms for the underworld: Sheol, the Pit, the grave, the depths, perdition, the land of oblivion. (Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* [New York, NY: Norton, 2007], commentary on 88:2, p. 308)

The culmination of the psalmist’s prayer, though, is not for deliverance from death, but an agonizing complaint over loneliness. Such is the severity of (perceived or actual) isolation! Loneliness trumps death.

<sup>12</sup> Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 379; see also Middleton, *Abraham’s Silence*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>13</sup> The superscription to *Mizmor* 102 reads, “...תְּפִלָּה לְעֵנִי” - “A prayer for the afflicted/destitute...” (v. 1). Rashi (ad loc., s.v. “תְּפִלָּה לְעֵנִי”) comments, “יִשְׂרָאֵל שֶׁהֵם עִם עֵנִי” - “[i.e.,] Israel, for they are an afflicted/destitute people.” Just as the *person* of faith is an “עֵנִי” (*Tehillim* 25:16; see discussion above), so too the nation of faith is identified with affliction and destitution.

<sup>14</sup> I do not discuss *Iyov* in this paper, though he may very well be the lonely man of faith *par excellence* (see, e.g., *Iyov* 19:13-15). *Iyov* is alienated from his wife, is accused of wrongdoing by his friends, and feels betrayed by God. His story is for another time, perhaps a future article.

Noach is the first *tzadik* in the entire Torah; the first *tzadik* ever, perhaps; he is also alone.

After the commencement of the Flood, Noach is left completely cut-off from the rest of humanity; only he and his family are left in the entire world. Even before the Flood, however, Noach was set apart by his faith in and adherence to God and His commandments.

The Torah tells us in the beginning of *Parshat Noach*, “אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת נֹחַ, נֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק,”<sup>15</sup> “These are the chronicles of Noach,<sup>15</sup> Noach, a righteous man, was wholly blameless in his generation [lit., “his generations”], with God did Noach walk” (*Bereshit* 6:9). The word “*be-dorotav*” - “in his generation(s)” - has long been seen as a qualifier of Noach’s righteousness, but its meaning has been debated.

There are two common approaches to understanding the significance of “*be-dorotav*,” both found in *Sanhedrin* 108a (also *Bereshit Rabbah* 30:9) and cited by Rashi in his commentary on *Bereshit* 6:9 (s.v., “בדרתיו”). The more popular approach argues that “in his generation” serves to negatively qualify Noach’s righteousness, as Rashi writes: “וַיֵּשׁ שְׂדוּרְשִׁים אוֹתוֹ לְגִנְאֵי: לְפִי דוֹרוֹ הָיָה צַדִּיק, וְאֵלּוֹ הָיָה בְּדוֹרוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם, לֹא הָיָה נֹחֶשֶׁב” - “And there are those who expound it to [Noach’s] demerit: According to his generation he was a *tzadik*, but if he had been in the generation of Avraham he would not be thought of as anything.”<sup>16</sup> That is to say, Noach was only righteous relative to his extremely immoral and debased generation.

The alternative approach, which is less well-known, picks up on the plural form of דור here and suggests that “כָּל שֶׁכֵּן אֵלּוֹ הָיָה בְּדוֹר צַדִּיקִים הָיָה צַדִּיק יוֹתֵר” - “All the more so if [Noach] had been in a righteous generation he would be even more righteous” (Rashi ad loc.). Presumably, influenced and nurtured by a just culture around him, Noach’s righteousness would have thrived.

Umberto Cassuto’s commentary essentially adopts this second approach: “According to the plain meaning of the text, the purpose of the plural [“generations”] seems to be to glorify Noah: not only was he righteous, but he was wholly righteous; not

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<sup>15</sup> For the meaning of “*toledot*” in this context, see Sarah Schwartz, “Narrative *Toledot* Formulae in Genesis: The Case of Heaven and Earth, Noah, and Isaac,” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 16 (2016): article 8, pp. 1-36, particularly pp. 16-20. See also Ibn Ezra on *Bereshit* 6:9, s.v. “אלה תולדות”; Rabbeinu Bachya ad loc., s.v. “אלה תולדות נח נח איש צדיק תמים היה בדורותיו את האלהים התהלך נח”; Radak ad loc., s.v. “אלה תולדות נח.”

<sup>16</sup> This *midrashic* reading ties Noach to Avraham (the next figure we will be examining). Everett Fox notes that the word “תמים” - “wholehearted” - in this verse is “Foreshadowing Avraham, of whom similar vocabulary will be used (17:1)” (Fox, trans., *The Five Books of Moses: The Schocken Bible, Volume 1* [New York, NY: Schocken Books, 2004], commentary on *Bereshit* 6:9, s.v. “righteous, wholehearted,” p. 35). Perhaps the Midrash is picking up on this *pashtanit* (plain meaning) intertextual link noted by Fox between these two figures. Regarding this paper, we see from this *midrash* that there is a longstanding tradition in Judaism of comparing — and contrasting — Noach and Avraham, the first two *tzadikim*. We will continue this tradition presently.

only was he outstanding in his righteousness among his contemporaries, that is, among those who, like himself, belonged to the tenth generation after Adam,<sup>17</sup> but he was pre-eminent in righteousness relative to all the generations that lived on earth in his days.”<sup>18</sup>

But there is another way to read this verse: Noach was a holy man living in an unholy world; a *tzadik* in wicked times. Noach’s family dwelled in a world of *chamas*, lawlessness and violence. I believe that with the word “his generation,” the Torah seeks to highlight Noach’s, and his family’s, utterly aloneness in being righteous in a miserable world. “*Dorotav*” emphasizes that fact that Noach is singularly unique; to highlight Noach’s distinction from the rest of the *dor ha-Mabbul*, generation of the Flood. Noach was a righteous man, wholehearted, in a wicked, wicked generation, understandably lonely.

The Ramban makes this argument in his commentary:

וְהַנִּכּוֹן בְּעֵינַי לְפִי הַפְּשָׁט כִּי טַעְמוֹ לֹא לִמְרָאָה לְבַדּוֹ הַצַּדִּיק בְּדוֹרוֹת הָהֵם, אֲיֵן בְּדוֹרוֹתָיו צַדִּיק וְלֹא תָמִים זִוְלָתוֹ.

And the correct [interpretation] in my eyes, according to the plain meaning, is that it means to say that he [Noach] alone was a righteous man in these generations. There was no righteous man in his generations, and no one wholly innocent except him. (commentary on *Bereshit* 6:9, s.v., “בדרתי”)<sup>19</sup>

There are other *midrashim* which seem to be trying to suggest and demonstrate the isolation and distinctiveness of Noach. One argues that Noach was born with a *brit milah*; in other words, Noach was *born* different from everyone else, marked from birth as a faithful follower of God (*Avot de-Rabbi Natan* 2:5). Another *midrash* understands the word “*ish*,” “man,” in *Bereshit* 6:9 to imply that Noach was constantly engaged in disputes with his neighbors (*Bereshit Rabbah* 30:7). Noach was at odds with everyone outside his home, so that even before the *Mabbul* that would leave Noach literally isolated from all people outside his immediate family, the man was isolated and separated from his community at large.

<sup>17</sup> Excluding the introductory “אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֹת נֹחַ,” there are 10 words in *Bereshit* 6:9. Victor P. Hamilton writes, “We remember too that Noah is the tenth generation from Adam according to the selective genealogy of Gen. 5:1-32. By using this sequence of ten words,” Hamilton suggests, “perhaps the author is underscoring the fact that Noah formed the tenth generation from creation” (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, NICOT [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990], p. 277).

<sup>18</sup> Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part II: From Noah to Abraham*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1964), pp. 49-50. See also Rabbeinu Bachya on *Bereshit* 6:9, s.v. “בדורותיו.”

<sup>19</sup> Rav Steinsaltz also seems to adopt this understanding. See R. Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, *Ha-Tanakh ha-Mevo’ar eem Peyrush ha-Rav Adin Even-Israel (Steinsaltz): Sefer Bereshit* (Jerusalem: Koren, 2017), commentary on 6:9, p. 79.

Noach is a man who lives his life in an isolating environment whereby he and his family are totally and completely cut-off from outside influence. This is the man of faith embracing his separateness and isolation. In the end, though, Noach becomes a depressed drunk. He is not picked to start God's nation. The isolationist model *does not work!* People, even (or especially) people of faith, need unpredictable, random human interactions. God cannot and does not want us to be alone, as the Torah explicitly tells us: “לא־טוֹב הָיְוֹת הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ, אֶעֱשֶׂה־לּוֹ עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ” - “It’s not good for man to be alone, I shall make a helpmate alongside him” (*Bereshit 2:18*).<sup>20</sup> (Perhaps the verse’s rhyme [“דו”] is meant to signal and bring attention to the eternal truth that it is not good for people to be alone. See note 9 above.)

Avraham embodies a model of faithful living very different from Noach’s, one that allows him to retain his distinct identity and still interact and even learn from his neighbors.

### III. *The Second Righteous Man: Avraham*

When Lot, his nephew, is taken captive, Avram is approached by a refugee and is identified for the first time ever, for any man of God, as an *Ivri*, a Hebrew: “וַיָּבֹא הַפְּלִיט” - “And the refugee came and told Avram the Hebrew, for he dwelt by the terebinths of Mamre the Emori, brother of Eshkol and brother of Aner, and they were covenantal allies [*benei brit*] with Avram” (*Bereshit 14:13*).

What is the meaning of *Ivri*? What does the Torah mean to say when it calls Avram a Hebrew? *Chazal* have many ideas:

רַבִּי יְהוּדָה וְרַבִּי נְחֵמְיָה וְרַבְּנָן: רַבִּי יְהוּדָה אוֹמֵר: כָּל הָעוֹלָם כְּלוּ מֵעֵבֶר אֶחָד, וְהוּא מֵעֵבֶר אֶחָד.  
רַבִּי נְחֵמְיָה אוֹמֵר: שְׂהוּא מִבְּנֵי בְּנֵי שָׁל עֵבֶר. וְרַבְּנָן אוֹמְרִי: שְׂהוּא מֵעֵבֶר הַנָּהָר, וְשְׂהוּא מִשִּׁיחַ  
בְּלִשׁוֹן עֵבֶרִי.

Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Nechemya and the rabbis [expounded on the significance of “*Ivri*”]: Rabbi Yehudah says: “All of the world was on one side [*eiver echad*], and he was on another side [*eiver echad*].” Rabbi Nechemya says: Because he was from the sons of Eiver’s sons. And the rabbis say: Because he was from the other side [*eiver*] of the [Jordan] river, and because he conversed in the *Ivri* language. (*Bereshit Rabbah 42:7*)

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<sup>20</sup> R. Jonathan Sacks, “A People That Dwells Alone?” *Covenant & Conversation* (blog), Balak 5771, 5784, <https://tinyurl.com/3v6zdznr>.



I think a common theme emerges from all these answers. The rabbis want to emphasize Avram's uniqueness, his status as a stranger amongst all of humanity at this time and place, whether it be in nationality, language, or beliefs. The rabbis agree that Avram (renamed Avraham in *Bereshit* 17:5) stands apart from other people, just not how.<sup>21</sup>

Now, Avraham is unique and distinct, but he is not alone.<sup>22</sup>

Unlike Noach, Avraham, despite disagreeing with the immoral and paganistic practices and beliefs of his neighbors, continues to engage with, and even learn from, his fellow man. We see in this *pasuk*, *Berehsit* 14:13, that Avraham is willing to forge connections with locals for emergencies.<sup>23</sup> But, Avraham goes further than making security and practical alliances.

In this *perek*, chap. 14 of *Bereshit*, Avraham meets the king of Shalem,<sup>24</sup> Malki-Tzedek, after saving those taken captive with Lot.<sup>25</sup> We read,

וּמִלְכֵי־צִדְקָה, מֶלֶךְ שָׁלֵם, הוֹצִיא לָחֶם וְיַיִן; וְהוּא כֹהֵן לְאֵל-עֵלְיוֹן: וַיְבָרְכֵהוּ וַיֹּאמֶר, בָּרוּךְ אֲבָרָם

לְאֵל-עֵלְיוֹן, קִנְיָה שָׁמַיִם וְאָרֶץ: וַיְבָרְךָ אֵל-עֵלְיוֹן אֲשֶׁר-מִצֵּן צָרֶיךָ בְּיָדָךְ ...

And Malki-Tzedek, king of Shalem, brought out bread and wine, and he was a priest to *El Elyon* [God Most High]. He blessed him and said: “Blessed be Avram of *El Elyon*, creator [or “possessor”] of heaven and

<sup>21</sup> The simplest, most likely meaning of *Ivri* on the *peshat* level is that it is an ethnic designation (see Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, pp. 404-405). This fact, however, does not diminish or contradict the message of *Bereshit Rabbah* 42:7. In *Sefer Bereshit*, home and birthplace is intimately tied to belief and behavior; it is for this reason that Avraham and Yitzchak are so adamant that their sons marry women *not* from Canaan (*Bereshit* 24:3-4; 28:2), and why Esav marrying local Canaanite women is so very problematic (26:34-35). Thus, the fact that Avraham comes from “across the river” is reflective of his unique beliefs and values. “Avraham the *Ivri*” tells us, like the *midrash*, that Avraham stands apart from his fellow Canaanites in his beliefs, in addition to ethnicity.

<sup>22</sup> I disagree with the Rav here. Rav Soloveitchik consistently represented Avraham as a lonely figure and argued that this is an essential aspect of the faith experience and “covenantal community” (e.g., R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Abraham's Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*, ed. David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky, and Reuven Ziegler, *MeOtzar HoRav* 9 [Jersey City, NJ: KTAV, 2008], pp. 38, 130, 138; R. Soloveitchik, *The Emergence of Ethical Man*, ed. Michael S. Berger, *MeOtzar HoRav* 5 [Jersey City, NJ: KTAV, 2005], pp. 149-155). While the Rav appeared to believe that loneliness was integral to a genuine belief in God, I see loneliness as, rather, a *common concurrence* — though not integral, necessary — feeling men and women of faith experience. In fact, the ideal is for men and women of faith to not be lonely, and Avraham embodies this non-lonely model of faithful living. It is important to note that the Rav *did not* believe people of faith should be secluded and isolated, only that they feel lonely, in his introspective, ontological sense. See, e.g., R. Soloveitchik, *Abraham's Journey*, p. 166.

<sup>23</sup> See R. Jonathan Grossman, *Abraham: The Story of a Journey* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2023), p. 58.

<sup>24</sup> Many *mefarshim*, in their respective commentaries on *Bereshit* 14:18, identify Shalem as Yerushalayim (e.g., Ibn Ezra, Radak, Ralbag, and the Ramban). Hamilton, and others, note that *Tehillim* 76:3 explicitly identifies Shalem as Tzion (= Yerushalayim) through poetic parallelism (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: 1-17*, p. 409; also, among others, R. Assad Bednarsh, “לך לך: From Sodom to Jerusalem,” in *Mitokh Ha-Ohel: Essays on the Weekly Parashah from the Rabbis and Professors of Yeshiva University*, ed. Daniel Z. Feldman and Stuart W. Halpern [New Milford, CT: Maggid, 2010], p. 40 [whole essay: pp. 39-44]).

<sup>25</sup> Much of the material here on Malki-Tzedek comes from a *shi'ur* delivered by my father, Rabbi Shmuel Hain, at *Mishmar* on November 12, 2024.

earth; and blessed be *El Elyon* who has given your foes into your hand.  
(vv. 18-20)

It is unclear from this passage if Malki-Tzedek is a priest of *Hashem*, the God on High, or of El Elyon, a Canaanite deity.<sup>26</sup> In Canaanite mythology, El is the creator god, co-ruler of all the deities of the pantheon with Ba'al.<sup>27</sup> Even if Malki-Tzedek worships *Hashem*,<sup>28</sup> it seems that, like Yitro, he adopts a syncretistic religious model that views the one God as the chief deity, rather than sole deity, in the universe (see *Shemot* 18:11).

Despite the king's questionable theological credentials, though, Avraham graciously accepts (or gives, it is unclear from the *pasuk*) a tithe from (to) Malki-Tzedek (*Bereshit* 14:20). Avraham, it seems, recognizes that Malki-Tzedek is a fundamentally righteous person, a *tzadik*, even if he is religiously misguided. This, I believe, is the source of Avraham's economic and military success, and religious success.

Further, Avraham is able to adopt the language of Malki-Tzedek to further spread knowledge of *Hashem* and His just power. Speaking to the king of Sedom, Avraham declares: “וְרָמַתִּי יָדִי אֶל-יְהוָה אֱ-לֵ-יְהוֹנָה, קִנְיָה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ:” - “I raise my hand [in oath] to *Y-H-V-H El Elyon*, creator [or “possessor”] of heaven and earth” (14:22). Avraham realizes that the language of “*El Elyon*” is useful to a polytheistic audience. From a polytheist, Malki-Tzedek, Avraham (1) is made into a better messenger of monotheism and (2) learns a new name for God! However, Avraham specifies when using *E-l Elyon* that he is speaking of God, *Y-H-V-H*, not El.

In addition, Malki-Tzedek introduces the idea of blessings and blessedness to Avraham *Avinu*; the king is the first person in the entire Torah to give a *brakhah*, emulating God's actions during Creation (*Bereshit* 1:22, 28; 2:3). Avraham is able to distinguish between the religiously useful and non-useful elements of the culture that surrounds him, and even adopts those useful elements into his religious vocabulary and practice.

Avraham affirms his distinctness as an *eved Hashem*, servant of God, while avoiding the isolating loneliness of so many other men and women of faith. Ultimately, this approach appears to be much more successful than Noach's; Avraham is chosen by God to be the founding patriarch of the Jewish people, and his reputation is that of an unambiguous *tzaddik*.

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<sup>26</sup> We will understand *El Elyon* in this case as “El Most High,” but El and Elyon may be two distinct deities. See G. Levi Della Vida, “El ‘Elyon in Genesis 14:18-20,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 63, no. 1 (Mar. 1944): pp. 1-9; E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Translated With an Introduction and Commentary and Notes*, 2nd ed., Anchor Bible 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), note on 14:18, s.v. “El-Elyōn,” p. 104.

<sup>27</sup> Ira Spar, “The Gods and Goddesses of Canaan,” in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York, NY: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–), online at <https://tinyurl.com/ftvj9uk2>.

<sup>28</sup> See *Tehillim* 110:4. The NJPS, and others, read *malki-tzedek* there as a “rightful king,” rather than as a name, Malki-Tzedek.

IV. *Chanukkah: Distinct, Not Alone*

We have seen that throughout Tanakh, and through to the present day, men and women of faith have often experienced isolation, betrayal, and loneliness.

But this need not be. This is not an integral aspect of the faith experience.<sup>29</sup> We can follow Avraham's model of faithful living, which allows us as Jews to retain our distinct identities while simultaneously interacting with and even learning from the world and general culture around us. Avraham learns a religious lesson from a polytheist!

We all await, anxiously and hopefully, the days when "*HASHEM* will be as a king over all the earth" (*Zekharyah* 14:9), recognized by all peoples of all faiths as the one and only true God. Until then, though, we can learn from and even improve our faith by interacting with general culture.

We can, and are in fact made better, by living in two worlds — the Jewish and non-Jewish. That is what it means to be holy (*Vayikra* 19:2). We are told by Yeshayahu that the heavenly angels proclaim to one another, "קְדוֹשׁ קְדוֹשׁ קְדוֹשׁ יְיָ-הוֹה זָבָאוֹת, מְלֵא" - "Sanctified, sanctified, sanctified is *HASHEM* of hosts, the earth is filled with His glory" (*Yeshayahu* 6:3). God is both transcendent and immanent; immediately present, part of our earthly world, and holy, that is, distinguished, different, apart. He resides in Heaven above, but His robe fills the worldly Temple (*Yeshayahu* 6:1).<sup>30</sup> Brueggemann and Bellinger write,

The Hebrew notion of holiness has to do with being set apart. [God] is set apart in the sense of being incomparable, different, unlike any other. This is God not set apart *from* the world, however, but rather set apart *to* the world.... In turn, ancient Israel is called to be holy or set apart to [God]. Holiness is thus not a separatist stance but a relational stance. [God] relates to the world in a distinct way, and Israel is called to reflect that stance.<sup>31</sup> (no emphasis added)

We, like God, should strive to be *part* of this world, and *apart* from the rest of the world. We are not meant to separate ourselves, silo ourselves off from society. We are also not meant to be identical to all the peoples surrounding us. Our challenge as Modern Orthodox Jews is thus a balance, an attempt to fulfill two contradictory pursuits: achieving a strong relationship with God and a strong communal identity, while

<sup>29</sup> See note 22 above.

<sup>30</sup> I learned this chapter of *Yeshayahu* in my 10<sup>th</sup> grade Tanakh class taught by Rabbi Nathaniel Helfgot, *shlit"a*, and my language and ideas here are influenced by his words. For another interpretation, cf. R. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, pp. 46-47.

<sup>31</sup> Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, NCBC, p. 425.

retaining a deep bond to the wider world around us and, occasionally and when appropriate, letting that world's vast knowledge into our faith.

On Chanukkah, we celebrate the Jews' triumph over assimilation, both forced upon some Jews by the Seleucids, and eagerly sought out by others. The Maccabees fought to ensure the Jewish people maintained a distinct identity. But we must not confuse *distinction* with *separation* or *distance*. General culture has much to offer the Jewish people; the key is to be able, like Avraham, to recognize what in culture is useful and religiously meaningful, and to understand how to appropriate these cultural ideas and intentions into religious theology and practice. We must be holy *and* an active participant in the world around us. Apart and distinguished, but not lonely. Unique, not alone.



## Torah or Tradition?

### *Exploring Hallel on Chanukkah*<sup>32</sup>

By AVITAL LINDENBAUM, '28

Whether it's regarding *kashrut*, the latter part of *Birkat ha-Mazon*, or reciting an unnecessary *brakhah*, the distinction of *mitzvot de-Oraita'* and *de-Rabbanan* (biblical and rabbinic commandments) is an important aspect of many *halakhic* conversations. When thinking about *Hallel* this year, I wondered if it, too, had a special *halakhic* status. Specifically, *Hallel* on Chanukkah could be a potential “double *de-Rabbanan*,” so I would like to explore its standing.

The Gemara in *Arakhin* (11a) explains that *Hallel* is *de-Oraita'*, though there are different opinions as to where in the Torah it is derived from. Shmuel believes that it comes from *Devarim* 18:7, which declares, “וְשֵׁרָת בְּשֵׁם יְיָ-הוֹה אֶלְהֵיוּ כְּכָל-אֶחָיו הַלְוִיִּם הָעֹמְדִים” - “He may serve in the name of his God *HASHEM* like all his fellow Levites who are there in attendance before *HASHEM*.” Shmuel further explains that the service this *pasuk* refers to is song, stating that the *Levi'im* recited the original *Hallel* as a part of the *korbanot* ceremony in the Beit ha-Mikdash.

Continuing the *gemara*, Rav Matanah has a different idea. He thinks the *mitzvah* of *Hallel* originates in *Devarim* 28:47. This *pasuk* states, “תַּחַת אֲשֶׁר לֹא-עֲבַדְתָּ אֶת-יְיָ-הוֹה” - “Because you would not serve your God *HASHEM* in joy and gladness over the abundance of everything.” Rav Matanah believes that this “joy and gladness” must be that of song, thereby concluding that *Hallel* is derived from this *pasuk*. Although there is a dispute over where *Hallel* truly originated, it is clear that this Gemara believes that *Hallel* is a *mitzvah de-Oraita'*.

The Rambam, however, has a different approach; he firmly believes that *Hallel* is *de-Rabbanan*. In his *Mishneh Torah* (*Hilkhot Chanukkah* 3:6), he states that not only is *Hallel* on Chanukkah *de-Rabbanan*, but *Hallel* is *de-Rabbanan* at all times.<sup>33</sup> The Rambam gets support for his claim from the Gemara in *Berakhot* 14a, which discusses the issue of *hefsek*, talking in an interrupting manner while *mitzvot* are being performed. It is established that while saying *Shema'*, one may greet someone more important than him, as it is out of respect and awe. The question then arises whether it is *kal va-chomer* that one would be able to talk during *mitzvot de-rabbanan*, and *Hallel* is the primary example in this case, further proving Rambam's argument.

The Rambam mentions this idea again in his *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*. He states in *Shorashim* 1:2,

והשתכל ממי שישמע לשונם נאמרו לו למשה בסיני וימנה קריאת ההלל ששבח בו דוד עליו

<sup>32</sup> This article is inspired by the work of Rav Moshe Taragin regarding this topic.

<sup>33</sup> I.e., even on a *de-Oraita'* holiday, the commandment to say *Hallel* is rabbinic.

השלום את האל יתברך שצוה בה משה וכן נר חנוכה שקבעוה חכמים בבית שני וכן קריאת המגילה. אמנם היות נאמר למשה בסיני שיצונו כי כשיהיה באחרית ממלכתנו ויקרה לנו עם היונים כך וכך יתחייב לנו להדליק נר חנוכה, הנה איני רואה שאחד ידמה זה או יעלה במחשבתו.

You can only stare at someone who hears [the Talmud's] statement, “stated to Moshe at Sinai,” and yet counts the recitation of Hallel in which David, peace be upon him, praised God, may He be blessed — that Moshe was commanded about it; or the Chanukkah light which the Sages established during the Second Temple; or the reading of the Megillah. I cannot see anyone imagine — or it even coming to his mind — that it was nevertheless stated to Moshe at Sinai that he should command us that when, at the end of our monarchy, such and such happens to us with the Greeks, we will be obligated regarding the Chanukkah light.<sup>34</sup>

The Rambam clearly finds it outrageous that one would include *Hallel* as a “*halakhah le-Moshe mi-Sinai*” - a *halakhah* given to Moshe, but not written down in the Torah. These *halakhot* have the same authority as *mitzvot de-Oraita*, so the Rambam is indirectly saying here that *Hallel* is *de-Rabbanan*.

However, the Ramban refutes this suggestion in his *Hasagot ha-Ramban al Sefer ha-Mitzvot* (Shorashim 1). He says that it is possible that *Hallel* is a *mitzvah de-Oraita*, but the liturgy and timing of when we are obligated to say *Hallel* were later added by the Rabbis. This is the same way we understand *davening*. Despite this, the Rambam insists that *Hallel* is fully *de-Rabbanan*.

While the Ramban strongly believes that *Hallel* is *de-Oraita*, he lacks a direct *pasuk* from the Torah to prove this assertion. The only remote reference he has is from *Yeshayahu*: “הַשִּׁיר יִהְיֶה לְכֶם כְּלִיל הַתְּקֵדָה שִׁחַג, וְשִׁמְחַת לֵבָב כַּהוֹלֵךְ בְּחִלְלֵי לְבוֹא בְּהַר-יְהוָה אֶל-צוּר:” - “For you, there shall be singing / As on a night when a festival is hallowed; / There shall be rejoicing as when they march / With flute, with hand-drums, and with lyres / To the Rock of Israel on the Mount of *HASHEM*” (*Yeshayahu* 30:29; NJPS, with minor alterations). In this *pasuk*, *Yeshayahu* is predicting victory over Sancheriv, the king of Ashur. Although this does not refer to *Hallel* itself, this source does refer to praising *Hashem* through song. Therefore, the Ramban concludes that *Hallel* may originate from this *pasuk*. However, the Ramban’s *pasuk* is not from the Torah itself; it is not worded directly by *Hashem*, mouth to mouth. This therefore diminishes any true meaning to the Ramban’s interpretation.

To solve this dilemma, the Ramban declares *Hallel* as a *mitzvah le-Moshe mi-Sinai*, contradicting the Rambam. Through doing this, the Ramban generates a new source: “וְשִׁמְחַת בְּחִנּוּךְ אֶתְּהָ וּבְנֵה וּבְתֵה וְעַבְדֵה וְאַמְתֵה וְהַלְוֵי וְהַגֵּר וְהַיְתוּם וְהָאֵלֶּמְנָה אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֵיךָ” - “You

<sup>34</sup> The translation is that of Rabbi Francis Nataf, *Sefaria Edition 2021*, available online at [https://www.sefaria.org/Sefer\\_HaMitzvot%2C\\_Shorashim.1?lang=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Sefer_HaMitzvot%2C_Shorashim.1?lang=en).

shall rejoice in your festival, with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the [family of the] Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your communities” (*Devarim* 16:14, NJPS). According to the Rambam (*Hilkhot Yom Tov* 6:17-19), this said *simchah* is actualized through *korbanot*, meat, and wine, and any other personal enjoyment. The Ramban adds to this that an additional expression of this *simchah* is through the recitation of *Hallel* (*Hasagot ha-Ramban al Sefer ha-Mitzvot* [Shorashim 1]). After all, the above *gemara* in *Arakhin* has stated that *Hallel* is part of the *korbanot* ritual, which causes *simchah*. If we follow this, we can assume that this expression of *simchah* should be a part of every *Yom Tov*.<sup>35</sup>

Another possible text proving *Hallel* could be *de-Oraita*' is *Pesachim* 117a, which states:

אָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה אָמַר שְׂמוּאֵל: שִׁיר שִׁבְתוֹרָה, מִשֶּׁה וַיִּשְׁרָאֵל אָמְרוּהוּ בְּשַׁעַה שְׁעָלוּ מִן הַיָּם. וְהַלֵּל  
זֶה מִי אָמְרוּ? נְבִיאִים שִׁבְיָנִיָּהוּ תִּקְנֻנוּ לָהֶן לְיִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁיְהוּ אוֹמְרִין אוֹתוֹ עַל כָּל פְּרָק וּפְרָק, וְעַל כָּל  
צָרָה וְצָרָה שְׁלֵא תְּבֵא עֲלֵיהֶן. וְלִכְשֶׁנִּגְאָלִין, אוֹמְרִים אוֹתוֹ עַל גְּאוּלְתָּן.

Rav Yehuda said that Shmuel said: the song in the Torah, i.e., the Song at the Sea (*Shemot* 15:1–19), Moshe and the Jewish people recited it when they ascended from the sea. The Gemara asks: And who said this *hallel* mentioned in the *mishnah*, *Tehillim* 113–118? The Gemara answers: The prophets among them established this *hallel* for the Jewish people, that they should recite it on every appropriate occasion; and for every trouble, may it not come upon them, they recite the supplications included in *hallel*. When they are redeemed, they recite it over their redemption, as *hallel* includes expressions of gratitude for the redemption.<sup>36</sup>

This *gemara* suggests that *Bnei Yisrael* recited *Hallel* as they were crossing the *Yam Suf*. Following this, the *Nevi'im* instituted the recitation of *Hallel* every time a threat to the Jewish people was relieved. Hence, it is concluded that *Hallel* is *de-Oraita*' during the performance of a national miracle. In fact, the Brisker Rav (commentary on *Pesachim* 117a, s.v. “אומרים אותו על גאולתן”) adds that this *gemara* is where saying *Hallel* at the *Seder* originates from. Thus, it is believed that *Hallel* is a *mitzvah de-Oraita*'.

Chanukkah is a holiday whose story did not occur in the times of Tanakh. Therefore, all practices surrounding it, whether it's lighting the *chanukiyah*, playing *dreidel*, or eating *sufganiyot*, are either *mitzvot de-Rabbanan* or *minhagim*, customs that do not qualify as *mitzvot* at all. To some, this could imply that Chanukkah is not as “important” or “real” of a holiday, especially compared to other Jewish *Yamim Tovim*.

<sup>35</sup> While the *gemara* in *Arakhin* states that *Hallel* is part of the sacrificial *avodah* (meaning it is required on *Yamim Tovim*), the Ramban concludes from here that *all* forms of *Hallel* — even those not said during the *avodah* — constitute an expression of joy and are obligatory on *Yamim Tovim*, which is not necessarily the implication of the *gemara*.

<sup>36</sup> Translation based on R. Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, *Koren Talmud Bavli, vol. 6: Pesachim Part 1* (Jerusalem: Koren, 2013), online at <https://www.sefaria.org/Pesachim.117a?lang=bi>.

Knowing that *Hallel* is *de-Oraita'* will hopefully add meaning and fulfillment to your Chanukkah. This is not only because Chanukkah is a *de-Rabbanan* holiday, but also because, as the Brisker Rav implies, it is a large part of this greater group of miracles in which *Hashem* saved us from a national threat. This makes it clear that although Chanukkah's story was not written down, it was an extremely difficult time for us Jews, and deserves the celebration that we have for getting through it.

*Chanukkah Sameach!*





**Alum Article****To Fry to the Occasion**  
*What Chanukkah Traditions Teach Us*

CHARLOTTE MOREEN, '24

When we think of Chanukkah, we think of receiving and giving presents, eating latkes and doughnuts, and playing *dreidel*, in addition to remembering the miracles that took place on the holiday. As opposed to Purim, when the celebrations of the holiday are spelled out in the *Megillah* itself (*Esther* 9:21-23), the origins of the cultural practices surrounding Chanukkah are a bit of a mystery. Evidently, the obligation to light the *chanukkiyah* stems from the miracle of the Menorah's oil lasting eight days, when it should have lasted for one just (*Shabbat* 21b). This then begs the question: Where does the culture and tradition of Chanukkah come from? Why do we have the customs that we do on this holiday, and what can they teach us about the holiday and its meaning?

Two common *minhagim* of Chanukkah are the giving of gifts and eating foods fried in oil, such as latkes and *sufganiyot*.<sup>37</sup> Gift-giving on Chanukkah is only a product of the last century or so, as before that, the closest Chanukkah tradition to gift-giving was the coins (*gelt*), which were given to children as presents or were given by students to underpaid teachers.<sup>38</sup> Since Chanukkah falls around the same time of year as Christmas, American parents didn't want their children to feel left out among their gentile peers, and so they started giving their children presents.<sup>39</sup> In addition, the Holocaust spurned an attempt to raise Jewish spirits and encourage Jewish pride, thus furthering the practice of gift-giving as a way to bring joy back to a fractured community.<sup>40</sup> In either case, the tradition of gift-giving arose from a need to create a greater sense of Jewish pride — which fits with the larger theme of the holiday as a whole. At the end of the Chanukkah story, the Maccabees rededicated the Second Beit ha-Mikdash, publicly reigniting the Jewish pride that the Greeks had tried to eradicate. Furthermore, one is supposed to light Chanukkah candles in the entrance of one's house or in a window,<sup>41</sup> which Rashi attributes to the need to publicize the Chanukkah miracle.<sup>42</sup> This obligation, however, also demonstrates our Jewish pride to the world.

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<sup>37</sup> Playing *Driedel* is also a big part of the Chanukkah fun. To learn more about it, read my article, "Spinning Away with the Holiday — The Significance of the *Dreidel*," *Ruach S'ARah* 5783, Chanukkah (Dec. 2022): pp. 5-6.

<sup>38</sup> David Schwartz, "The Origin of Chanukah Customs," *Sefaria*, accessed December 12, 2024, at <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/364186?lang=bi>.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> "Why Do We Give Gifts on Hanukkah?" *iKonnnect*, accessed December 12, 2024, available at <https://tinyurl.com/4dy4x886>.

<sup>41</sup> See *Shabbat* 21b.

<sup>42</sup> Rashi, commentary ad loc., s.v. "מבהוין."

Thus, one of the themes of Chanukkah is having pride in Judaism, which we practice through separate customs such as gift-giving and publicizing our Jewish identity and the miracle of Chanukkah.

As for the tradition of eating latkes on Chanukkah, it seems to have arisen from far more complicated circumstances. Before the introduction of the latke, it was customary to eat cheese on Chanukkah, in commemoration of the story of Yehudit beating the Assyrian general Holofernes by feeding him salty cheese and wine before cutting off his head (see, e.g., *Ben Ish Chai, Halakhot Shanah Aleph, Halakhot Chanukkah* 24). One version of the Book of Judith says that Judith fed Holofernes cheese pancakes, which may have inspired the tradition of making pancakes on Chanukah. Flour was added to these pancakes (instead of schmaltz), and once potatoes became a widespread food that was cheaper than flour,<sup>43</sup> the potato pancake became the default.<sup>44</sup> In addition to the custom of eating fried foods reminding us of the oil that lasted for eight days, latkes are an example of how the Jews have taken the culture around them and made it theirs, as opposed to assimilating as the Greeks had hoped. Jews took potatoes, a staple of the European diet, and made them a unique part of Jewish culture. Instead of disappearing into the people around us, we have continued to strengthen our Jewish pride and culture. We have preserved our own traditions and, by adapting the culture around us to make new customs of our own, have shown our pride in our Jewish identity and the strength of our Jewish spirit. These Chanukkah *minhagim* remind us to be proud of who we are and what we have accomplished as a people.

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<sup>43</sup> Potatoes were brought over from South America to Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and people quickly realized that they were a source of abundant nutrients and easy to grow. Potatoes were also planted in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to prevent famine. Thus, potatoes became cheaper than flour, transforming them into a food staple still popular today.

<sup>44</sup> Susannah Brodnitz, "The Real History of Potato Latkes Will Surprise You: Dive into the history of how fried South American potatoes became a quintessential Jewish food," *The Nosh*, December 8, 2022, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/the-nosh/the-real-history-of-potato-latkes-will-surprise-you.r>

## The Little Flames in Our Lives

By YOSEFA OBERSTEIN, '28

The *mitzvah* of Chanukkah is unique among Jewish holidays due to the timing of the miracle. According to tradition, the wars and celebrations of Chanukkah took place during the Second Temple period, from 539 BCE to its destruction in 70 CE. From the story of Chanukkah, we receive the joyful *mitzvah* of lighting the Chanukkah candles. However, this *mitzvah* can be confusing to understand, prompting many rabbis to offer explanations to help us understand its true essence.

One of the most well-known debates surrounding Chanukkah is the discussion over the order in which to light the candles.

The controversy surrounding the order to light candles is found in *Likutei Halakhot (Orach Chaim, Hilkhoh Hashkamat ha-Boker 4:11)*. Beit Shammai argues the order of candle lighting should begin with eight candles on the first night and reducing a candle every night after. However, Beit Hillel approaches the order differently, arguing we should add a candle each night.

Beit Hillel's approach, lighting one candle on the first day and adding one each subsequent day, has become the practice we follow today. Yet, Beit Shammai's perspective of beginning with eight candles and reducing by one each day, though less commonly observed, offers intriguing insights.

I believe the concept of “counting down” has a significant symbolic meaning, especially in relation to miracles. On Chanukkah, the miracles are vivid and obvious, but at other times, miracles might not be as overt. Beit Shammai's decreasing order of lights could be seen as reflecting a decrease in the visibility of open miracles over time.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks wrote about the miracle of the splitting of the Reed Sea:

The division of the Red Sea is engraved in Jewish memory. We recite it daily in the morning service, at the transition from the Verses of Praise to the beginning of communal prayer. We speak of it again after the Shema, just before the Amidah. It was the supreme miracle of the exodus.<sup>45</sup>

The Splitting of the Sea was a spectacular miracle, and the language of the Torah captures its grandeur: “וַיִּשָׂא מֹשֶׁה אֶת-יָדוֹ עַל-הַיָּם וַיִּזְלַח יְ-הוָה אֶת-הַיָּם בְּרוּחַ קְדָיִם עֶזְבָּה כָּל-הַלְּיָלָה, וַיִּשָּׂם” - “And Moshe stretched out his arm over the sea, and *HASHEM* made the water recede with an mighty easternly wind all night, and He made the sea as dry ground, and the water was split” (*Shemot* 14:21). The Splitting of the Sea

<sup>45</sup> R. Jonathan Sacks, “Miracles,” *Covenant & Conversation*, January 23, 2010, accessed December 12, 2024, <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/beshallah/miracles/>.

was the pinnacle of miracles; *Hashem* had never performed such a visible and tangible miracle before. Therefore, according to my interpretation of Beit Shammai, this would correspond to the first night of Chanukkah (when eight candles are lit), when miracles are most apparent. The eight candles represent the most overt and dramatic miracles, lighting up the room.

However, not all miracles are as grand or as obvious as the miracles described in the Torah. In daily life, miracles often go unnoticed, simply because they occur so frequently. Beit Shammai's approach, where we start with eight candles and reduce to one, could symbolize the gradual shift from the obvious miracles of the past to the smaller, more subtle miracles of daily life.

Waking up each morning is a miracle in itself, a sign of *Hashem's* presence in our lives. But because it happens so routinely, we often overlook this miracle. I believe that for Beit Shammai, the last day of Chanukkah, with its single candle, represents this quiet, everyday miracle. Just as we light the final candle, small though it may be, we should recognize and honor the small miracles that fill our daily lives.

We express this gratitude for simple miracles every morning when we say the prayer *Modeh Ani*:

מוֹדֵה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ, מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיִם, שֶׁשָׁתַּחֲוִיתָ בִּי נִשְׁמָתִי בְּחַמְלָה, רַבָּה אֶמְוִנְתָּךְ:

I give thanks to You, living and enduring king, for You returned my soul with compassion. Great is Your faithfulness.

This teaches us that we should never take for granted miracles, big or small, that *Hashem* gives us each day. I prefer to think of the eight candles as representing the grand miracles of the Torah, while the one candle on the final day symbolizes the quiet, everyday miracles we often overlook.

Although on Chanukkah we follow the practice of Beit Hillel, I believe we can still learn from Beit Shammai's perspective. So, this Chanukkah, let us reflect on the miracles in our lives, those that light up a room like the first night, and those smaller miracles that still bring light, even as we transition into everyday life.

## From Creation to Chanukkah

### *Understanding Light and Darkness in the Torah*

By NOA SCHLAFF-PEARLBERG, '26

When we think of Chanukkah, the first thing that inevitably comes to mind is the light of the Menorah. In the story of Chanukkah, the Menorah in the *Beit ha-Mikdash* was lit by the one *pakh shemen*, and in current times, light is displayed on Chanukkah through our use of *chanukkiyot*. The rededication of the *Beit ha-Mikdash*, and the dark winter months that Chanukkah lights up, further deepen Chanukkah's association with light. But what exactly is the significance of light? Besides its physical appearance, is there a specific reason light is highlighted in certain areas of Judaism? And what about darkness? Does it, too, have a meaning for us as Jews beyond the physical realm? Looking to some prevalent examples of light and darkness in the Torah can help shed a little light (see what I did there...) on how to approach this Chanukkah, and our lives as a whole, with more meaning.

*Bereshit*, the very beginning of the entire Torah, begins with the theme of light and darkness, but specifically darkness:

וְהָאָרֶץ חֹשֶׁךְ וְחָשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם:

The earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water (*Bereishit* 1:2).

The world begins in the shadows. Light is not mentioned until verse 3, where we are given a description of how light was created: “וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אוֹר וַיְהִי־אוֹר:” - “God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light” (*Bereshit* 1:3). But darkness, it seems, was simply there already. Oftentimes when we think of darkness we are just thinking of the absence of light: a room with the lights shut out, a day without something to look forward to. But *Bereshit* seems to be depicting the contrary. Darkness is not the absence of light, but an entity of its own.

*Bereshit Rabbah* depicts the light in *Bereshit* as a light that *Hashem* “גָּנְזוּ לְצַדִּיקִים” - “Hid away for the righteous in the future” (12:6). *Hashem*, explains the Midrash, saw that the light was too precious for the wicked generation of Noach to see, and thus hid it away for future, more deserving and upright, generations. The light in *Bereshit* is not an overwhelming sense of renewal, but rather something too precious, too holy, for an evil people. Many other commentaries, including Rashi (*Bereishit* 1:4, s.v. “וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאוֹר כִּי טוֹב וַיְבַדֵּל”) and *The Zohar* (*Terumah* 3:17), also quote this approach to the original light. Strangely, the assumed roles of light and darkness seem to be switching in *Bereshit*. Darkness gets the opening scene, the main role, whilst light seems to be on a different planet entirely.

Something else we see in *Bereshit* is the separation between light and dark. The Torah clearly displays this separation, including the words “וַיַּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין חֹשֶׁךְ” - “And God separated the light from the darkness” (*Bereishit* 1:4). “וַיַּבְדֵּל” is a strong word. We use the root to signify the separation between *kodesh* and *chol*, the sanctified and the unholy, and the word is used in the context of setting the Leviim aside from the rest of the nation (*Bamidbar* 16:9; *Devarim* 10:8). Rashi furthers the significance of this distinction between light and darkness, saying,

וּלְפִי פְּשׁוּטוֹ כָּךְ פָּרְשָׁהוּ, רָאָהוּ כִּי טוֹב, וְאֵין נֹאָה לוֹ וְלַחֲשֶׁךְ שִׁיְהִי מִשְׁתַּמְּשִׁים בְּעֶרְבוּבָא, וְקָבַע לְזֶה תַּחֲוִמוֹ בַּיּוֹם, וְלְזֶה תַּחֲוִמוֹ בַּלַּיְלָה.

But according to the plain sense, explain it thus: He saw that it was good and that it was not seemly that light and darkness should function together in a confused manner. He therefore limited this one's sphere of activity to the daytime. (Rashi on *Bereshit* 1:4, s.v. “וירא א-להים את האור כי” “טוב ויבדל”)

To Rashi, if light and dark were to exist together it would lead to confusion. God gave us a set amount of hours of both day and night so that we would not mix up the two conflicting worlds. *Bereshit* suggests that darkness has its own purpose, with light acting as a more *kadosh* entity. And the two are as separate as they come.

In the story of *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, there is yet another striking contrast between light and darkness. First of all, the mere theme of slavery versus redemption puts light and dark against each other. When we were slaves in Egypt we were living in the dark, whilst freedom was the symbol of light, a new beginning. This is reflected in the fire of the burning bush, where Moshe learned of God's plan to free *Bnei Yisrael*, and in the fire that led them through the night once they had gained their freedom. But looking at what happened in the dark, before *Bnei Yisrael* were freed, it doesn't seem so clear-cut that light and dark are harsh opponents. The last three plagues, *Arbeh* (locusts), *Choshekh* (darkness), and *makkat Bekhorot* (slaying of the firstborn), all mention darkness. The Torah, describing *makkat Arbeh*, states that because of the locusts “וַתְּחַשְׁךְ הָאָרֶץ” - “The land was darkened” (*Shemot* 10:15). *Makkat Choshekh* is then described as follows,

וַיֹּאמֶר יְיָ-הוֹה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה נְטֵה יָדְךָ עַל-הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיְהִי חֹשֶׁךְ עַל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וַיִּמַּשׁ חֹשֶׁךְ:

Then God said to Moshe, “Hold out your arm toward the sky that there may be darkness upon the land of Egypt, a darkness that can be touched. (*Shemot* 10:21)

Ibn Ezra comments on this *pasuk* that the meaning of *ve-yamesh choshekh* (a darkness that can be touched) is that the Egyptians could reach out and feel the darkness with

their hands because of how thick, how present, it was (commentary on *Shemot* 10:21, s.v. “וימש חשך”). The darkness in *Makkat Choshekh* was, like *Bereshit*, not just an absence of light. It had a sense of physicality on its own.

*Makkat Bekhorot* happens in the darkness, at night, as the *pesukim* say the plague happened “כְּחֻצֹת הַלַּיְלָה” - “At around midnight” (*Shemot* 11:4). From these last three *makkot*, we see that *Bnei Yisrael*’s freedom really began in the darkness. The times we were the closest to serving *Hashem*, such as eating the *korban pesach*, are all mentioned with a connection to darkness. Our freedom began in the depths of the hard times. But the *pesukim* are extremely ambiguous about when *Bnei Yisrael* actually left Egypt and became a free people. The phrase, “מֵעַצְמוֹ הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה הוֹצֵאתִי אֶת־צְבָאוֹתֶיכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ” - “On this very **day** I brought your ranks out of the land of Egypt” (*Shemot* 12:17), appears, but so does the phrase, “לַיַּל שְׁמֵרִים הוּא לִי-הַנֶּה לְהוֹצִיאֵם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם” - “That was for God a night of vigil to bring them out of the land of Egypt” (*Shemot* 12:42). The nation may have started the process to freedom in the dark, but when did they truly become free people, in the dark or in the light? This question can be answered by considering what darkness symbolizes in the last of the *makkot*. Darkness was combined with the freeing acts of the *korban pesach* and the last few *makkot* to show that it is a driving force of freedom, of light. But if darkness has become a symbol of freedom, then what does light symbolize? The Torah makes it clear that in ch. 12, when *Hashem* commands Moshe, and Moshe then commands the nation, to observe *Chag ha-Pesach*, for all intents and purposes, *Yetziat Mitzrayim* happened during the day. It is written, “זָכוֹר אֶת־הַיּוֹם” - “Remember this *day*, on which you went free from Egypt” (*Shemot* 13:3). And in the very next *pasuk* it is written yet again, “הַיּוֹם אַתֶּם יֹצְאִים” - “You go free on this **day**” (*Shemot* 13:4). *Pesach*’s connection to daytime can help explain the Torah’s message about light. Light symbolizes God’s presence and the spiritual connection we have with Him. Unlike the thick, physical darkness that *Bereshit* and the *makkot* highlight, light is found through connections like *chagim*, where God’s presence is woven within the day.

This symbol of light also has a profound connection with the *ner tamid*, the light that burned at all times in the *Ohel Mo’ed* of the *Mishkan* (*Shemot* 27:20). But one can ask: What is the point of having a *ner tamid* if there is already light during the day? Why does the candle not simply shine at night? The answer is the same as that of the question of why the *korban pesach* is associated with the day. It is because just like darkness is not the absence of light, light is not merely meant to brighten the dark. It is a symbol of the *shekhinah*. And the way we can reach out to *Hashem*, to come closer to the *shechinah*, is through times of darkness.

In fact, we can read the word “וַיִּבְדֵּל” in *Bereshit*, not as a clear separation between light and dark, but that dark *causes* light. The other times this word “וַיִּבְדֵּל” appears, in terms of separating Shabbat from the weekdays and the Leviim from the rest of the camp, it can also be read with a sense of connection, not separation. We would not be

able to move into our busy lives if we did not have Shabbat, and the Leviim are actually supposed to guide *Bnei Yisrael* in the laws of Torah (*Devarim* 33:10). In the story of *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, too, darkness is its own force that leads to freedom, to light. These past qr months are a testament to this message. Rabbi Sacks write, "There always were two ways to live in a world that is often dark and full of tears. We can curse the darkness or we can light a light."<sup>46</sup> We have all seen how darkness can be a physical force of its own, like the darkness in *Makkat Choshekh*, acting without light. But we have also seen how the same darkness can be a force that guides us towards chesed and good actions.

As for light, the Torah writes that the *Mishkan* was dedicated on the eighth day of its preparation (*Vayikra* 9:1). While the number seven represents completion and the natural world (seven days of creation, *Shemittah* , *shiv'ah minim*), the number eight is a symbol of the supernatural world.<sup>47</sup> It is associated with Shemini Atzeret, our intimate day with *Hashem*, *brit mila*, a spiritual *brit* with Hashem, and the Chanukkah candles. These candles can be seen as a representation of our spiritual connection with *Hashem*, and maybe this is one of the reasons we are not supposed to derive any physical benefit from their light (*Shabbat 21b*). Like the *ner tamid*, the light of the *chanukkiyah* can serve as a reminder that *Hashem* is always and will always be there for us.

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<sup>46</sup> R. Jonathan Sacks, "A Chanukah Message for the Third Night," *Ceremony & Celebration: Family Edition Series* (December 2020), accessed December 15, 2024, available online at <https://rabbisacks.org/app/uploads/2020/12/CandC-Chanukah-3.pdf>.

<sup>47</sup> R. Yehoshua Stokar. "The Magical Number Of 8," *Torah Mitzion*, June 7 2015, online at <https://torahmitzion.org/learn/the-magical-number-of-8/>.



## The Past Today

### An Exploration of a Brakhah on a Nes<sup>48</sup>

By REVAYA SHILLER, '28

The *brakhah* of *She-Asah Nissim* that we say when lighting Chanukkah candles seems straightforward: We are acknowledging that *Hashem* performed miracles for our ancestors. However, upon closer inspection, the words “בימים ההם בזמן הזה” - “in those days at this time” are more subject to interpretation. Examining the evolution of this *brakhah*, we may better understand the significance of those words and the *brakhah* as a whole.

*She-Asah Nissim* is first mentioned in the Gemara, where the text discusses a mysterious *brakhah* referred to as “*nes*” (*Shabbat* 23a). But how did the *brakhah* evolve from the word “*nes*” to the full blessing we say today?

We need to take a step back in order to take a step forward. A *mishnah* in *Berakhot* states:

הַרוֹאֶה מְקוֹם שֶׁנַּעֲשׂוּ בוֹ נִסִּים לְיִשְׂרָאֵל, אֹמֵר בְּרוּךְ שֶׁעָשָׂה נִסִּים לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ בְּמְקוֹם הַזֶּה.

One who sees a place where miracles occurred for Israel recites: Blessed...Who performed miracles for our forefathers **in this place**. (*Mishnah Berakhot* 9:1; trans. based on Koren-Steinsaltz<sup>49</sup>)

The Mishnah is telling us that there is value in acknowledging the miracles *Hashem* did for your ancestors when you come across the place He performed them.

The Rif expands on this idea. He writes the *brakhah* of “*nes*” as “שעשה ניסים” - “(Blessed are You *Hashem*) who performed miracles for our forefathers **at this time**” (Rif on *Shabbat* 23a). According to the Rif, just like it is important to remember the miracles *Hashem* did at a specific place, it is also important to remember the miracles *Hashem* did at specific times and make a *brakhah* on them.

Many early *siddurim* show signs of a very different approach to this *brakhah*. The most striking example of this alternative approach is in *Machzor Vitry*, a book of *halakhah* and *tefillot* written by Rabbi Simcha of Vitry within a hundred years of the Rif’s commentary. He writes the *brakhah* of *she-asah nissim* as: “ברוך אתה י-הוה א-להינו: “Blessed are You *Hashem*, king of the universe, who performed miracles for our forefathers **in those days and at this time**” (*Machzor Vitry, Seder Chanukkah* §236)

<sup>48</sup> Inspired by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom.

<sup>49</sup> R. Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, *Koren Talmud Bavli, vol. 1: Berakhot* (Jerusalem: Koren, 2012), online at <https://www.sefaria.org/Berakhot?tab=contents>.

This *brakhah* is strikingly similar to the *brakhah* we are familiar with, with the exception of one letter: a *vav*. Instead of the phrase we are familiar with, “בימים ההם בזמן הזה” - “in those days at this time,” Rabbi Simcha of Vitry writes, “בימים ההם ובזמן הזה” - “in those days **and** at this time.”

To understand the significance of the additional *vav*, we need to look at another piece of *tefillah* from this *siddur*. *Machzor Vitry* includes an additional line in the *Al hha-NNissim* that we insert in our *Shemoneh Esreh* on Chanukkah:

וכשם שעשית לאבותינו ניסים וגבורות בימים ההם בזמן הזה כן עשה עמנו י-הוה א-להינו  
פלא וניסים לטובה בעת הזאת.

Just as You performed miracles and displayed might for our forefathers at this time of year, so too perform wonders and miracles for the good for us in this age. (*Machzor Vitry, Seder Chanukkah* §235)

Perhaps Chanukkah is primarily a time to focus on our prayers and hopes that Hashem will do miracles for us in the future, not only an opportunity to recognize the ones He has already done in the past. If we look at the addition of the *vav* through this lens, then that version of *She-Asah Nissim* is hopeful and messianic. We are asking *Hashem* to bring light to our lives just as He did for the Maccabim so many years ago. From this perspective, the *focus* of Chanukkah is not to commemorate and celebrate the miracles of the past, but to focus on the future.

As intriguing as this approach sounds, we do not traditionally lean into the messianic side of Chanukkah. We light Chanukkah candles to remember the miracle of light in the *Beit ha-Mikdash*. We sing *Ma'oz Tzur*, a song describing all the miracles *Hashem* performed for us many years ago. We say the *brakhah* of *She-Asah Nissim* without including the *vav* and the *vav*'s implications, therefore remaining ambiguous – these words leave room for both a historical perspective on Chanukkah and a hopeful one.

Which approach is more compelling to you? Should we lean into the glory of *Hashem* in our past, or focus on praying for similar exhibitions of glory in the future?



