YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**SPECIAL CHANUKA 5779 SHIUR**

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**Dedicated in loving memory of Abraham Gontownik z"l**

**on the occasion of his nineteenth Yahrzeit, and**

**in honor and in celebration of both the birth of**

**Jacob Abraham to Daniela and Zev, and the wedding of Ezra to Lilly Katz.**

**The Gontownik Family**

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**THe continuing relevance of the miracle of the oil**

**Based on a sicha by Rav Ezra Bick**

Summarized by Binyamin Frankel with Elisha Oron

Translated by David Strauss

The Rambam opens *Hilkhot Chanuka* with a description of the historic victory of the Hasmoneans:

In [the era of] the Second Temple, the Greek kingdom issued decrees against the Jewish people, [attempting to] nullify their faith and refusing to allow them to observe the Torah and its commandments. They extended their hands against their property and their daughters; they entered the Sanctuary, wrought havoc within, and made the sacraments impure.

The Jews suffered great difficulties from them, for they oppressed them greatly until the God of our ancestors had mercy upon them, delivered them from their hand, and saved them. The sons of the Hasmoneans, the High Priests, overcame [them], slew them, and saved the Jews from their hand.

They appointed a king from the priests, and sovereignty returned to Israel for more than 200 years, until the destruction of the Second Temple. (*Hilkhot Megilla ve-Chanuka* 3:1)

The Rambam emphasizes the historic victory, but later he writes:

When the Jews overcame their enemies and destroyed them, they entered the Sanctuary; this was on the twenty-fifth of Kislev. They could not find any pure oil in the Sanctuary, with the exception of a single cruse. It contained enough oil to burn for merely one day. They lit the arrangement of candles from it for eight days until they could crush olives and produce pure oil.(ibid. *halakha* 2)

The Rambam then issues the following ruling:

For this reason, the Sages of that generation ordained that these eight days, which begin from the twenty-fifth of Kislev, should be commemorated to be days of happiness and praise [of God]. Candles should be lit in the evening at the entrance to the houses on each and every one of these eight nights to publicize and reveal the miracle. These days are called Chanuka. It is forbidden to eulogize and fast on them, as on the days of Purim. Lighting the candles on these days is a Rabbinic mitzva, like the reading of the Megilla. (ibid., *halakha* 3)

To what do the words "for this reason" relate? To *halakha* 1 (the victory) or *halakha* 2 (the cruse of oil)? They clearly relate to the previous *halakha*, *halakha* 2, for only that *halakha* makes mention of a specific date. (War, by its very nature, has no specific date.)

But we can take this one step further. *Megillat Ta'anit* lists the various days on which fasting is prohibited, these being festive days during the Second Temple period on which the Jewish people celebrated various victories. Why was all of *Megillat Ta'anit* cancelled with the exception of Chanuka and Purim? On the face of it, after the destruction of the Temple, the minor events were no longer relevant. Therefore, the Rambam emphasizes here "for this reason," because Chanuka is still relevant even after the destruction.

It is forbidden to fast on a festive day, but once it is no longer considered a festive day, fasting is permitted. The 25th of Kislev represents the discovery of the cruse of pure oil, which counteracted the fact that "they made the sacraments impure." The restoration of purity remains relevant even after the destruction, and therefore the Rambam understands that Chanuka was not cancelled as were all the other days listed in *Megillat Ta'anit.*

What did "the Sages of the generation" understand? In historical perspective, who says that God looked favorably upon the festival of Chanuka? First of all, we have a sign, the very fact that on the day that the Jews entered the Temple in order to purify it, God miraculously made available to them a cruse of pure oil. This is on the immediate and historical level. We must, however, go beyond this and try to understand the meaning of this sign. The discovery of the cruse of oil that would burn for eight days symbolized for the Sages God's favorable acceptance of and concurrence with the victory. Oil for one day parallels the restoration of the kingdom of Israel for close to two hundred years. But if with God's consent one day's oil lasted for more days, so too the festival is relevant for a longer period of time. Even if the popular perception of the miracle was cancelled with the destruction of the Temple, there is a deeper aspect to Chanuka that is relevant even for later generations.

This explains how God gave the Sages a sign by way of the cruse of oil, through its very discovery and through its lasting for eight days, that the festival of Chanuka will remain relevant for all generations. But we must understand the meaning that was attached to the holiday. The Rambam writes that the candle lighting is "to publicize and reveal the miracle," and then he draws a connection between Chanuka and Purim: "These days are called Chanuka. It is forbidden to eulogize and fast on them, as on the days of Purim. Lighting the candles on these days is a Rabbinic mitzva, like the reading of the Megilla" (*Hilkhot Megilla ve-Chanuka* 3:3).

Our lighting the Chanuka candles is also a sign, just like the Megilla, and just as there is content in the Megilla, so too there is content in the lighting of the Chanuka candles, which it behooves us to understand. What is that publicizing of the miracle? Surely God's power finds expression in the other holidays as well. What greater miracle was there than the exodus from Egypt and the splitting of the Sea of Suf?

It seems, however, that Hellenism was a wave that swept across the world and could not be stopped. Our ways of thought derive from, among other things, Greek philosophy. The very fact that our forefathers could not find more than one sealed cruse of pure oil represents the nearly total takeover of Greece.

The oil in the cruse that was finally found lasted for eight days, which was precisely the amount of time needed to prepare new oil, in order to create a sequence of purity. By allowing for the cruse to be found, God promised us that a remnant of purity would always remain, no matter how many waves inundate the world. We are forever promised a little spark that will be able to maintain and reestablish Judaism for all time.

A situation develops, and sometimes becomes permanent, in which we become "normal," and we fail to see beyond the stage in which we are currently found, beyond the two hundred years during which time the monarchy was restored to Israel. There were those who invested great effort to preserve Jewish shtetl life because they were convinced that Judaism would not survive the flood of enlightenment and modernity. Even today, do we really believe that the historical processes that appear fixed and permanent can ever be reversed? On the family and community level we might be okay, but do we really believe that the people of Israel can ever again become the seat of the *Shekhina* and sanctify God's name in the world?

We are more optimistic than were our forefathers, but this finds expression only in the fact that we are confident about ourselves. What about the rest of Israel? Many "normal" Jews are overcome by the pessimism of the Hellenists and believe that the Jewish people will not transcend itself. The lesson to be learned from the cruse of oil is that a tiny match can light a large fire. "And the house of Yaakov shall be a fire, and the house of Yosef a flame" (*Ovadya* 1:18).

What was the success of the Hasmoneans? The continuation of the Second Temple, even though it was on the verge of internal destruction. *Chazal* wish to teach us that this dimension exists today as well. Even a small foundation, even one small cruse, can be the beginning of an entire building.

The first Chanuka that I was in the yeshiva, I had just gotten off the airplane, and HaRav Lichtenstein asked me to speak at the yeshiva’s Chanuka celebration. This is what I said at that time. We must see this potential not only in ourselves, but in the entire house of Israel. This seems impossible, but in fact it is possible, because only a single cruse of oil is needed.

It is of utmost importance that we believe about every Jew that we see, and not only when we look at ourselves, that he is supposed to be part of the Jewish people, part of a great fire that we will all light together. This is not realistic, but this is exactly the message that God sent us when He allowed the oil to continue burning for eight days. God will make sure that a connection is made between the tiny spark that we must find and the work that must be done to create the great fire. We need only believe in the existence of the spark, and work to raise that wondrous fire, with God's help.

(This *sicha* was delivered on Chanuka 5774 [2013].)