YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**On Zeal and Baseless Hatred**

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**Thanksgiving for the Miracle of the Cruse of Oil?**

*Chazal* explain the celebration of Chanuka as a commemoration of the miracle of the cruse of oil:

What is [the reason for] Chanuka? Our Rabbis taught: On the 25th of Kislev [begin] the days of Chanuka, which are eight… When the Greeks entered the Sanctuary, they defiled all the oils that were there. And when the Hasmonean dynasty prevailed against them and defeated them, they searched and found only one cruse of oil that still remained with the seal of the *Kohen Gadol*, and it contained only enough for one day’s lighting. But a miracle was wrought through it, and they lit with it for eight days. The following year they appointed [these days] as festive days, with [the recital of] *Hallel* and thanksgiving. (*Shabbat* 21b)

However, in the special *Al Ha-Nissim* addition to the *Amida* prayer and *Birkat Ha-Mazon* recited on Chanuka, not a word is mentioned about this miracle. Instead, we give thanks to God for having fought for His people, taking revenge on our behalf and delivering our enemies into our hands. While we do note that “afterwards, Your children came to Your Holy Place and cleared Your Sanctuary and purified Your Temple, and lit lamps in Your holy courts,” there is no mention whatsoever of the miracle associated with this lighting.

In truth, miracles were common in the Temple. The *mishna* in *Avot* (5:7) enumerates ten miracles that occurred there on a regular basis, and especially wondrous are the phenomena associated with the oil of the *menora*. Thus, for example, the *midrash* records:

R. Chanina, the deputy *Kohen Gadol*, said: “I served in the Temple, and there was a miraculous phenomenon concerning the *menora.* From when it was lit on Rosh Ha-Shana, it would not be extinguished until the next year.” Once, the olives failed to produce oil. The *Kohanim* began to weep, and R. Chanina, the deputy *Kohen Gadol*, said: “I was in the Temple, and I found the *menora* burning more than it burned the entire year.” (*Tanchuma*, *Tetzaveh* 3)

If the *menora* burned every year from Rosh Ha-Shana until the next Rosh Ha-Shana, what makes the miracle of the cruse of oil so special that an eight-day festival was established to commemorate it?

Moreover, we might note that the purification of the Temple and rededication of the altar, following the defiling of both by the Greeks, did not signify the end of the war. According to *Sefer* *Makkabim*, the *Chashmonaim* faced many more difficult battles, which lasted for many months. Yehuda Makkabi would fall in battle, as would his brothers Yonatan and Shimon. What, then, is the meaning of the celebration?

**From *Hester Panim* to the Light of the Lamps**

Today, the days of Chanuka bear a message of light, but if we were to go back in time, we would likely find this period experienced not as one of deliverance, but rather as a time of *hester panim*, a hiding of God’s face, a time of great darkness. A great war of survival was being waged over the Torah and Jewish belief; Jews gave up their lives for their faith and for the commandments. The Jews of that generation experienced the literal fulfillment of the verse, “For Your sake we are killed all the day” (*Tehillim* 44:23), while God appeared to be indifferent.

Not all of *Am Yisrael* suffered from this *hester panim*. The nation was divided at the time into two camps: those loyal to God and His covenant, and the Hellenists, who violated this covenant. Sadly, it seemed that God was hiding His face specifically from the small core of His believers. It was they who were persecuted and forced to take refuge in caves and pits, while those who flagrantly desecrated the Torah seemed to be flourishing. Where was the justice here?

This question appears to have troubled the faithful Jews who fought and endangered their lives for their beliefs, and they sought answers. Perhaps they even began to entertain doubts, wondering if, even if their intentions were unquestionably good, perhaps their actions were deemed unworthy. This question might have arisen against the background of the fact that their struggle was aimed not only against foreign rulers who passed laws outlawing Jewish practices on pain of death, but also (and perhaps principally) against violators of God’s covenant within the nation – Jewish brethren who welcomed and assimilated into the foreign culture and lifestyle, facilitating the foreign imposition. *Sefer Makkabim* (I 2:23-47) attests to the origins of the rebellion as follows:

Now when he finished speaking these words, a Jewish man approached in the sight of all, to offer a sacrifice upon the altar in the city of Modi’in, at the king’s command. And Matityahu saw this and was zealous… and his wrath was kindled… and he ran and slew him upon the altar. And he killed the king’s representative, who compelled this sacrifice, at the same time… And Matityahu cried out in the city with a loud voice, saying, “Everyone who is zealous for the Torah, and maintains the covenant, let him follow me!”

And they waged battle, and slew the wicked ones in their anger and the sinners in their wrath, and those who remained fled to the nations for safety.

The camp of the faithful awaited some sort of Heavenly sign that their path was worthy. Although they had already achieved some impressive victories, there was still no clear sign. Only when the *Makkabim* came to the Temple, found a cruse of oil stamped with the seal of the *Kohen Gadol*, and witnessed the miracle that restarted the perpetual lighting in the Temple – only then could they be sure that their actions and their path had found favor in God’s eyes. Although a long road still lay ahead, they were already filled with new spirit, confident that it was God Who was giving them the strength to succeed.

It is perhaps for this reason that the festival of Chanuka was instituted in commemoration of the miracle of the cruse of oil.

**From a War of Independence to Civil War**

However, even if the battle itself earned Divine approval, those who waged it did not earn the same. The venerated family of *Kohanim*, the *Chashmonaim*, served both as *Kohanim* and as rulers for a considerable period of time, but there ultimately remained no remnant of them at all. Indeed, their fate was like that of the wicked dynasties of Israel – the house of Yerov’am, the house of Basha, and the house of Achav. Why did the Hasmonean dynasty deserve this miserable end?

A review of the events of their time offers one single answer: civil war. In contrast to the wonderful harmony that prevailed in the household of Matityahu, by the third generation – and even more so by the fourth – brothers were fighting each other over succession. In their quest, they stopped at nothing and were willing to resort to any means, including inviting intervention by foreign elements. The sovereignty acquired through a prolonged and bloody war of independence was handed over to strangers upon the silver platter of hostility and civil war.

The sin and its punishment were two sides of the same coin. There was no need for any Divine punishment. The rulers and the people effectively punished themselves.

This may be the profound meaning of *Chazal’s* teaching concerning the destruction of the Second Temple:

Why was the First Temple destroyed? Because of three things that took place – idolatry, sexual immorality, and bloodshed…

But the Second Temple – where [the people] were engaged in Torah [study], [observance of] the commandments, and acts of kindness – why was it destroyed? Because there was baseless hatred. This teaches that baseless hatred is comparable to the three [cardinal] sins: idolatry, sexual immorality, and bloodshed. (*Yoma* 9b)

*Chazal’s* teaching about the baseless hatred that existed during the Second Temple Period is usually understood as referring to the last few decades of the Temple’s existence. However, just as their teaching about the sins of the First Temple applies to most of that period, there was similarly baseless hatred over a very long period of time. It makes sense that the destruction of the Temple and of the land would not come in response to sins that were perpetrated for a relatively short time, by just one generation; it is a punishment befitting fundamental flaws carried from generation to generation. It seems likely that from the time of the succession wars of the Hasmonean brothers, the nation was split into different parties and camps, with hatred wreaking its damage at every turn.

**“And Grant You Mercy”**

*Chazal’s* teaching about the sins that led to the Destruction of the Second Temple leads to a perplexing question. How is it possible that people who are engaged in Torah study, performing *mitzvot*, and practicing kindness can arrive at baseless hatred so deep and so thorough that it might be compared to the three cardinal sins?

We might shed light on this phenomenon by looking at the conclusion of the Biblical unit concerning the *ir ha-nidachat*, the city led astray after idolatry, which is thereforecondemned. After the command that all the inhabitants of the city be slain, the Torah adds:

That the Lord may turn from the fierceness of His anger, and grant you mercy, and have compassion upon you. (*Devarim* 13:18)

Where does “granting mercy” fit into this picture? The Netziv explains in his *Ha’amek Davar*:

One who kills another person becomes desensitized by nature… For this reason the Torah promises… “that the Lord may turn from the fierceness of His anger and grant you mercy” – the attribute of mercy.

Even when one is engaged in performing a *mitzva*, if it involves some measure of hard-heartedness, then it is inevitable that one’s inner being will be affected. Hence the need for a promise of God’s direct intervention, as it were, protecting those who act out of faith, with no hidden personal agenda or interest at stake, from the dangerous influence of their actions on their own souls.

If this is the case concerning the *ir ha-nidachat*, which is a very rare (perhaps one-time) phenomenon (see *Sanhedrin* 71a), then the danger of becoming desensitized and even cruel is all the more immediate and relevant when the conflict concerns an ongoing struggle, both external and internal, that is directed towards fellow Jews.

The hatred that the *Chashmonaim* and their pious followers felt towards the Hellenists was surely not baseless hatred. How could one not hate those seeking to uproot the religious and national foundations of Jewish existence, distancing themselves from the faintest relationship with Jewish tradition? After all, these people were not only leading themselves to spiritual annihilation, but also seeking to impose foreign norms on Jewish society as a whole, and to drag the entire nation to oblivion!

But hatred and war follow their own dynamic, and their poisonous atmosphere seeps into the soul of the individual and the collective, with devastating consequences. Long after the reasons and justifications for hatred had disappeared, the enmity remained in the form of baseless hatred, continuing to eat away at Jewish unity.

Thus, it turns out – and it is truly a terrible thought – that the hatred that destroyed our Second Temple had its roots in the days of “Whoever is for God, let him follow me!”, the days of purification of the Temple and renewal of its service.

There may be times when we are left with no other option but to take up the sword in rebellion, gathering around us the hard core of those who are faithful to Torah in order to defend our faith, our very soul. At the same time, we must be aware that the effects of words and actions can last for many years. Woe to us if the very act of building holds within it the seeds of future destruction!