

The Opportunity of Chanukah – JewishClarity.com

The first question with Chanukah is — what happened?

The short version of the story is that the Greeks along with the assimilated Hellenized Jews tried to destroy Judaism by imposing Greek values on the rest of the Jews. A small group of Jews (the Macabees) successfully battled back and managed to maintain traditional Jewish values for the Jewish nation.

How Does this Apply to Us?

Due to the cyclical nature of time, we know that this same dynamic occurs every year at this season. The Western world still poses a challenge for Judaism, throughout the year but most particularly during this time of the year, through the Western values that every Jew is confronted with today. And, unfortunately, it is still only a small number of Jews that are trying to battle back to maintain our traditional Jewish values.

Therefore, our goals with Chanukah are to understand:

What exactly are these Greek/Western values that are so destructive?
How do they differ from traditional Torah values?
How does Chanukah specifically help us to fight them?

A Look at *Parshat Lech-lecha*

Parshat Lech-lecha touches on some of these issues. The opening verse (*Bereshit* 12:1) discusses three things that Avram is commanded to leave behind:

“And G-d said to Avram — Go for yourself from **your land**, from **your birthplace**, and from **your father's house**, to a land that I will show you.”

These three things — land, birthplace (i.e., the region within the country where he is presently living), and father's house (the actual home he is now living in) — seem to be out of order. Once one has left his country, he has necessarily also left his birthplace; and once one has left his birthplace, he has obviously also left his father's house. Based on the order of this command for Avram to leave, it must be that *Lech-lecha* (which means “go for yourself”) was not only a physical journey; it was a spiritual one as well — in which case, the order would be understandable (as explained below). And this may explain why the end of the verse — “to a land that I will show you” — never stated a specific destination for this journey. The nature of every spiritual journey is that we can never definitively know our destination ahead of time.

What did Avram's spiritual journey consist of? The three initial things were leaving his land, birthplace, and father's house.

“**Land**” corresponds to nationality and patriotism — one's primary identity and loyalty. This is, of course, just as relevant for us to clarify today — Are Jews who are born and raised in America, for example, primarily American Jews or Jewish Americans?

“**Birthplace**” corresponds to community — the source of a person's societal values. In every society, we need to ask ourselves — How do we know our values are right?

“**Father's house**” corresponds to our most personal values, as well as our identity.

As the Torah continues, however, Avram is subsequently required to give up his connection to many more things:

The land of Israel (temporarily – due to a famine)
His wife *Sara* (also temporarily — with Pharaoh)
His nephew *Lot* (permanently)
Risking his own life (in the War with the Kings)
Money (the booty from the war)
His close connection to the rest of mankind (with the *bris* — circumcision)
The spiritual bliss of prophesy (when he goes to attend to the three guests)
His wife *Sara* a second time (also temporarily — but this time with Avimelech)
His second wife (*Hagar*)
His eldest son (*Yishmael*)
His most beloved son, his logic, and his entire mission in life (with the command to offer Yitzchak on the altar).

Why would Avram need to separate from all of these obviously valuable things? Let's look at a *mishnah* in *Pirke Avot* to see if we can understand this.

Appreciating the Beauty of the World

Rebbe Yaakov says: One that is walking on the road and learning, and stops his learning and says — “How nice is this tree. How nice is this plowed field,” the verse considers it as if he is obligated for his soul. (*Pirke Avot* 3:9)

This is a very difficult *mishnah* to understand. Imagine that this person (in the *mishnah*) wants to enjoy the beauty of the tree and the plowed field. And since he is serious about his learning, he makes sure to continue learning Torah even while he is walking towards these things, only stopping when he actually reaches them, to then appreciate their beauty. If even this behavior is criticized by the *mishnah*, and quite harshly, then it would seem that there is no permissible way for a person to ever enjoy the beauties of the world. Does this *mishnah* mean to tell us that G-d made a beautiful world merely as a distraction or as a temptation, perhaps to test our dedication to Torah learning? In addition, does it make sense that the person being chastised by the *mishnah* would have been better off not learning at all while walking toward the tree and the plowed field, in order that he would then have no need to “stop his learning” before admiring them?

If we examine this *mishnah* carefully, however, we will find the key to understanding its correct message. What is the critical point which unlocks the true meaning of this *mishnah*?

Before this fellow ever said the fateful words – “How nice is this tree. How nice is this plowed field,” the *mishnah* tells us that he “**stopped his learning**.” What does it mean that he “stopped his learning”? In order to appreciate this, let's think about this presentation of Chanukah.

Would it be accurate to say that we began discussing Chanukah, and then **stopped our learning** to speak about *parshat Lech-lecha*? And after that, we **stopped our learning** to analyze a *mishnah* in *Pirke Avot*? And, then we **stopped our learning** to get back to this presentation on Chanukah? Of course not! What really happened was that we began discussing Chanukah, and then **continued our learning** to speak about *parshas Lech-lecha*. And after that, we **continued our learning** to analyze a *mishnah* in *Pirke Avot*. And then we **continued our learning** to get back to speaking about Chanukah. We never stopped our learning at all. We were learning the whole time, and simply switched **what** we were learning from one text to another.

With this in mind, let's return to our *mishnah* and the fellow who wants to enjoy the beauty of the tree and the plowed field. The key question is why he wants to do this. Does he want to appreciate the beautiful world that G-d made, or is he merely interested in being stimulated and entertained? By telling us that he “stopped his learning” before he ever commented on the beauty

of the tree and the plowed field, it is clear that he was not interested in this being a learning experience. And the message of the *mishnah* is that for someone to treat the beauty in G-d's world as mere entertainment is terrible.

What is particularly fascinating is the inference that we can draw from this *mishnah* — what would this fellow's situation have been had he **not** “stopped his learning” before focusing on the beauty of the tree and the plowed field? The Rambam gives a beautiful description of what this would then have looked like. In the second chapter of *Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah* (The laws of the Foundations of the Torah 2:2) he discusses how one can come to love and fear of G-d.

When one contemplates G-d's actions, along with His great and wondrous creations, and sees G-d's unlimited wisdom from them, he will necessarily love, praise, glorify, and have a great desire to know G-d's great Name...

And when one thinks [more deeply] about these things, he will necessarily recoil back with fear and trembling. He will know that he is a tiny creature, dark and lowly, standing with his tiny and flimsy mind before the One with complete knowledge...

We see a tremendous contrast in the different ways a person can appreciate the world's beauty. As mere stimulation and entertainment — one has caused terrible spiritual damage to oneself. If, however, this is used as a vehicle to connect with G-d — it will then be the catalyst to bring us to both love and fear of G-d, two of the loftiest goals in all of Judaism. It all depends on whether we relate to the beauty of the world as a means or as an end.

If we examine the *mishnah* further, we will see that this principle has an even broader application. The person that was walking on the road and stopped his learning didn't only comment on the beauty of a tree; he also appreciated the beauty of a plowed field. Why would the *mishnah* bring two cases to seemingly illustrate the very same point? If we think about it, however, we will realize that the two cases are not actually the same; they have a very significant difference. A tree is an example of natural **G-d made beauty** while a plowed field is specifically an expression of **man-made beauty**. By stating both cases, the *mishnah* is telling us that the importance of connecting back to the reality of G-d is relevant even to man-made beauty — for example, all types of art.

Let's now apply this point to the difficulty we had in *parshat Lech-lecha* — where Avram was required to give up his connection to so many valuable things.

For The One and Only

Monotheism — belief in one G-d — means that there is one and only one true reality. As important as the land of Israel, Avram's wife, his relatives, his own life, etc. were, they could never be absolute values. The only absolute value is the reality of G-d. Everything in this world is, therefore, valuable only to the extent that it is defined by and a means to connect with the reality of G-d. The process of Avram (and later Avraham) separating from everything else dear to him demonstrated the centrality of G-d to every single aspect of his life and the world.

This is the essential concept and message of Chanukah

Whether we should relate to beauty as a means or as an end is one of the core areas of conflict between the physicality/superficiality of Greek values and the spirituality/depth of Torah values. While both the Greeks and the Jews had an appreciation of the physical world, this value stemmed from fundamentally different perspectives — i.e., whether the physical was an end in and of itself — as the Greeks believed, or a means to a higher end — as the Jews believed.

The Miracle of the Menorah

Rav Hirsch (in his commentary on the Torah – Parshas Terumah) explains that the *menorah*, the vehicle for the miracle of Chanukah, beautifully expressed this Torah perspective. To appreciate his words, we first need to understand the symbolisms of the numbers six, seven, and eight:

- a. Six (as in the first six days of creation) expresses the idea of physicality exclusively for the sake of the physical — i.e., as an end in itself.
- b. Seven (as in *Shabbat* — the seventh day of the week) — expresses the concept of physical for the sake of that which is beyond the physical — i.e., as a means to connect to G-d and the spiritual realm.
- c. Eight (as in circumcision — ideally done on the eighth day) — expresses the notion of the spiritual realm and reality — i.e., entirely beyond the physical.

Rav Hirsch wrote that the *menorah* had seven branches arranged in a configuration of six plus one (i.e., one single central branch — like the trunk of a tree, with three branches extending outward on either side). The six outer lights all had their wicks pointing inward towards the seventh one — which itself pointed towards the *kodesh kodashim* (holy of holies) in the Temple. This expressed the **Jewish** concept of the number seven — the physical for the sake of that which is beyond the physical.

While Rav Hirsch doesn't say this himself, we could suggest that if the Greeks would have had a *menorah*, it would have had only six branches and lights — expressing **their** philosophy of six — physicality exclusively for the sake of the physical.

Through the miracle of the oil lasting for (specifically) eight days, the *menorah* “settled the argument” with the Greeks in a beautifully symbolic manner. Once this miracle showed us that the metaphysical was real, it became obvious that G-d and spirituality should be the endpoint for all of our efforts in the physical world.

Dedication and Education

One of the central issues that Chanukah grapples with is how a community will be able to maintain its identity and values while living in the midst of a much larger society. What will allow it not only to survive, but to flourish as a distinctive culture? The answer is both contained in and alluded to in the name of the holiday:

- a. “Chanukah” literally means — “dedication”. As I once heard from Rav Matis Weinberg, the concept of dedication is when something with various possible uses is set aside to be used for only one of these. This is not only a religious concept. One could dedicate a phone line, for example, to be used exclusively for a fax machine or for a computer.

Proper dedication is really the essence of a Jewish life. Beginning with his initial journey from his land, birthplace, and father's house, and continuing with the many separations he was required to make afterwards, Avraham dedicated absolutely everything in his life to G-d. And the *mishnah* in *Pirke Avot* tells us that we need to try to emulate this through dedicating all of the physical world and its beauty to G-d as well.

- b. The word “Chanukah” is also related to the term “*chinuch*” (roughly translated as “education”). In order for Judaism to survive, it is critical that there be a reliable educational system to transmit Jewish values from one generation to the next. A more literal translation of “*chinuch*” is the

process of “forming and transforming” oneself. Within the context of Chanukah, this could mean to commit oneself to become a *Macabee* — i.e., to fight for the Jewish people and Jewish values.

Eight Days of Chanukah

One of the most frequently asked questions about Chanukah is why we celebrate it for eight days. After all, when the Jews recaptured the Temple, they found a flask of pure oil which was sufficient to last for the first night. That would seem to imply that the miracle of the oil **continuing** to burn lasted for only seven days. One of the many answers to this question is that the miracle which we are celebrating on the first night of Chanukah is the actual **finding** of the pure oil. This pure flask in the midst of the Greek defilement of the Temple is symbolic of the *pintele yid* — the Jewishness deep within every Jew, no matter how far away he happens to be from Judaism. And once we are able to ignite this dormant Jewishness, it will continue to radiate light.

Chanukah is the time to remind ourselves that, while the physical world is meaningless as an end in and of itself, it is incredibly significant as a means — to connect us to G-d and the spiritual realm. The battle of Chanukah, in terms of the clash between Greek and Jewish values, is as relevant today as it was 2,000 years ago. And it is certainly no coincidence that Chanukah occurs every year exactly when the physical values of the Western world are most prominent all around us. Just as the Jewish people were victorious, both physically and spiritually, at the time of the original Chanukah miracle, G-d should help us to continue to win today's spiritual battles in maintaining the connection to our Jewish heritage and values — and successfully passing this along to the future generations.