



THE RABBI BINYAMIN KAMENETZKY
TORAH LEGACY FOUNDATION
לזכרון של הרב בנימין קמנצקי זצ"ל

אמרי בנימן

דברי תורה, מחשבה וסיפורים מאוצרו של
הגאון רב בנימן קמנצקי זצ"ל

*A Dvar Torah from the writings of Rav Binyamin Kamenetzky zt"l,
transcribed by his grandson, Rabbi Shmuel Kamenetzky*

5780 - Chanukah - Why the Oil?

The gemara in Masechta Shabbos (21a) asks a simple, yet intricate question, "Mai Chanukah?" "What is Chanukah?" Rashi explains, "For which miracle did our sages establish the holiday." The gemara then recounts the story of the Greeks who entered into the Beis Hamikdash defiling all of the olive oil used for the menorah. When the Chashmonaim defeated them, they reentered the Beis Hamikdash, searched for pure olive oil, and eventually found a small jug sealed with the stamp of the Kohen Gadol. They used this jug until they were able to produce more pure olive, and it miraculously lasted eight days. The next year, the Sages established the holiday of Chanukah. One can ask as follows, there were many miracles in the story of Chanukah, besides for the miracle of the oil. The weak and untrained army of the Jews, were a minute fraction of the size of the mighty Greek army, yet they defeated the biggest army in the world! Many other miracles happened during this time as well, all of them paving the way for the physical and spiritual victory of the Jews.

Why then was the Holiday of Chanukah established solely to celebrate the miracle of the long-lasting oil?

There is a famous story which has circled the globe many times, but it sheds a beautiful light on this question.

Rav Yisroel Spira zt"l, known as the "Bluzhever Rebbe" was a saintly Jew who lived through the horrors of the Holocaust, losing his wife and children.

He told of the Chanukah when he lit candles in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. He had no sooner recited the blessings than he was asked, "Rabbi, even here you have lit the candles and said the brachos, 'lehadlik ner' and 'she'asa nissim', I can understand. But what justification do you have in saying 'she'he'cheyanu'? How can you bless a G-d who has 'kept us alive and preserved us and enabled us to reach this time' when all around us, thousands of us are dying before our very eyes?"

The Rebbe held his questioner in his thoughtful and penetrating gaze, while contemplating his response. "I too ask myself this question," he replied softly. "I looked for an answer and finally found one,."

"When I recited the blessing, I saw that a large crowd had gathered - risking their own lives in so doing - to watch the lighting of the candles. By the very fact that we are a nation of loyal Jews - prepared to give their lives for the lighting of the candles - by that very fact alone we may recite 'she'hecheyanu."

My grandfather, Rav Binyamin Kamenetzky zt"l explains, that the lamps of the menorah represent the learning of Torah, as the gemara tells us, "One who wishes to acquire wisdom, shall go south." (The menorah was placed on the south side of the Beis Hamikdash.) The Torah has kept us alive throughout the ages, no matter how dismal the times were. Our sages understood that Chanukah was not the last time that there will be difficulties for the Jews. They knew that there will be thousands of years of exile, when the darkness of the times will be so real and palpable, that we may give up hope.

Chanukah lights up our lives with a message. Although we no longer have the oil which fuels the menorah, we do however, have the learning of Torah which fuels our existence and our ability to thrive. This "oil" will last forever. No matter how weak or minimal the oil is, and no matter how bleak and hopeless the situation seems, we must remember the miracle of Chanukah.

The small flame miraculously burned for days. Our Torah, and our passion and drive to learn it, will continue to burn, sometimes miraculously, as long as we fuel it with our constant desire to grow closer to Hashem. That ubiquitous oil, the Torah, will continue to pull us through this long and bitter exile, no matter how small the flame is, and no matter how little oil is left.

And precisely that is why our sages chose to celebrate the miracle of the everlasting lights.

Happy Chanukah!

Rabbi Shmuel Kamenetzky is the Director of Advancement at Yeshiva of South Shore - ישיבה תורת חיים - בית בנימן. He is currently compiling the vast storehouse of all the Torah thoughts from his grandfather. If you have any stories to share from his grandfather, you can email him at skamenetzky@yoss.org.