

## Triumph Of Light Over Darkness (Edited Transcript)

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The festival of Chanukah is important for various different reasons. On a surface level, we simply light the Channukia for eight days. However, it is important that we deepen our level of understanding of the festival. Paradoxically, one of the obstacles to a deeper understanding of things is familiarity. Sometimes we become so familiar with something that it's difficult to take a step back and understand it in its full depth. Chanukah is a perfect example of this.

### The story of Chanukah

The history of Chanukah was that the Greek Empire, which was a colonial power, had conquered different parts of the world including the Land of Israel. The ideology of the Greek Empire was Hellenism which it wanted to spread across the world. Hellenism is paganism focusing on the pursuit of physical pleasure and perfection. The Greeks tried to enforce this ideology on the people of Israel and brought idols into the temple. They outlawed the practice of the Commandments, in particular the observance of Shabbat and circumcision. For the Greeks circumcision was an aberration because for them the ultimate value in the world was physical perfection and circumcision, in their view, cut and harmed the physical body. There was enormous ideological pressure coming from all sides against the Jewish people and the Land of Israel under the tyrannical rule of the Greek Empire.

An uprising began, led by Matityahu and the Hasmoneans priests, against the Greek Empire. It's an interesting event of the history of the world because this was arguably one of the earliest liberation struggles. A liberation army led by Matityahu struggled to fight against a mighty colonial empire and they were victorious. That essentially is the story of Chanukah. It was an actual historical event and we mark the victory of the small group of people against the much larger Greek Empire. After they defeated the Greeks, Matityahu and the Hasmoneans went into the Temple to rededicate it. That's where the name of the festival comes from - Chanukah means to rededicate. They rededicated the Temple to sanctity and to the service of G-d. They cleaned out the temple and removed all of the idols there. They began to re-establish it in purity. We talk about them cleaning it out, and there was physical cleaning and repair work but there was spiritual work to do too. There is a halachic concept in Jewish Law called Tamei and Tahor - something can become spiritually impure and can't be used in the Temple. For example, something which has come into contact with a dead body cannot be brought into the Temple. They needed to spiritually purify the temple.

During the process of purifying, as they were rededicating and getting everything to work again, they came across the Golden Menorah, which is described in the Book of Exodus and burned only with olive oil. All the olive oil that was in the Temple had been defiled by the Greeks, meaning it had become spiritually impure, so they didn't have pure oil to use in the Menorah. Then they found one jug of pure oil. They knew it was pure because it still had the unbroken seal of the high priest on it and they used it to rekindle the lights of the menorah. The only problem was, as the Talmud relates, that in that jug there was only enough oil to burn for one day but, through a miracle, it burned for eight. To remember that miracle of the oil burning for eight days we light candles for the eight days of Chanukah.

### An eight-day miracle

Our commentators have asked : since there was enough oil to burn for one day, the miracle was in fact only a seven-day miracle and not an eight-day miracle ? so why do we celebrate for eight days? One answer is that finding the oil itself was a miracle. Another answer is that to last for eight days one eighth only must have burnt on each day and so that was a miracle which endured for eight days.

Another answer is that the extra day is to remember the miracle of the battle ? that they were able to defeat the Greek Empire was a miracle in itself. The truth is that that answer raises another question. The festival is devoted to the miracle of the oil burning for

eight days. Yet there was another miracle taking place, which was the military defeat of the Greeks. It was an awesome achievement for a world super-power to be defeated by the small liberation army of Matityahu and the Hasmoneans. Surely this, and not the few extra days that the oil burned, was the real miracle? Furthermore, one of the questions raised in regard to the act is that there is a law that if you don't have pure oil to use in the Menorah you can actually use impure oil. So they could have used impure oil if pure oil was not available making the miracle unnecessary.

The whole festival focuses on the burning of the Menorah, and so we light an extra candle each night. To such an extent is this so that one of the blessings we recite when lighting the candles is, 'Blessed Oh You Oh G-d who has done miracles for our forefathers and us in those days and in these?'. Our commentators explain that the miracle the blessing refers to is the miracle of the burning of the oil, and not the military victory, which itself was a miracle.

The whole focus on only one dimension of the miracle, the burning of the Menorah and not the miracle of the military victory, gives rise to a question which requires a careful analysis of the events of Chanukah. This deeper analysis of Chanukah will give us a far more profound understanding of this festival.

### **A rededication**

In order to understand Chanukah we need to go back in time to the time in the desert when G-d instructed the building of the Tabernacle - the forerunner of the Temple. Upon completion, the people went through a dedication ceremony called Chanukat HaMizbayach, the Dedication of the Altar. The leaders of the tribes brought special offerings to the Temple in order to dedicate it to service to G-d. Twelve offerings were brought but one tribe did not bring an offering. Although Jacob had twelve sons and the tribe of Joseph was divided into two tribes, Ephraim and Menashe, making thirteen tribes. The tribe that was left out was Levi which is the tribe of Moses and of Aaron and within that tribe were the Kohanim, the priests. According to a Midrash in the Talmud, Aaron complained to G-d saying that his tribe was not involved in the dedication ceremony. This was such an important moment, how could we be left out of it, he said. The Talmud says that Aaron was told that they would have another dedication ceremony, another Chanukah in future generations, and this was reference to the time of the Greeks when descendants of Aaron rededicated the Temple to the service of G-d.

The Ramban cites this Midrash in his comments on that portion of the Book of Bamidbar (Numbers) which talks about the lighting of the Menorah in order to tell us that this lighting will be performed for all times because it will occur during the festival of Chanukah. And so the achievements of Aaron and his descendants were not limited to the Temple, but extended beyond the Temple because the lighting of the menorah persists and will continue through our festival of Chanukah. When the Temple was destroyed all of the other dimensions of the Temple ended with it. But our lighting the Menorah on Chanukah is an echo of the Menorah that was lit in the Temple. One difference is that the menorah in the Temple had seven branches while the menorah we light has eight branches in order to accommodate the eight days of Chanukah. In addition, we are not allowed to light a menorah that is an exact replica of the one in the Temple. G-d told Aaron : you were not involved in the first Chanukah in history, in the first dedication that took place in the desert, but you will be involved in another Chanukah, which is the rededication of the Temple after your descendants, the Hasmoneans, conquer the Greeks and are able to purify the Temple again; and that Chanukah is going to be an eternal one because even after the destruction of the Temple the Jewish people will continue to light Chanukah candles remembering the heroism and courage of your descendants, the Hasmoneans and Kohanim, who, like you, will, of course, be Kohanim (priests).

### **The message of the oil**

The Channukia represents the courage of the descendants of Aaron and the eternity of the light represents that even after the Temple was destroyed their light continues. Rav Aharon Kotler explains the message of the light and the symbol of the jar of oil. He was a great rabbi and the late Rosh Yeshiva of Lakewood, New Jersey who came from Lithuania from the great Yeshiva of Szobotka to the United States of America during World War II. He escaped the fires of the holocaust and came to set up a new Yeshiva in Lakewood, New Jersey, which started with just a few students but today has around 5000 students. That was the amazing work that he did and in many ways his life was the Chanukah story. He says the message of Chanukah is this : that the little jar of oil which should not have burned for so long, but only for one day and yet burned for eight, defied all the laws of the physical world; and so

long as the oil is pure, so long as the light is the pure light of Torah, is the pure light of G-d's Wisdom and G-d's Will and G-d's Values then it will burn forever and it will defy all of the laws of nature.

The eternal message of Chanukah goes beyond the immediate struggle of the Jewish people against the Greek Empire - this was really a struggle of values. There was a clash of civilisations between the hedonism of the Greeks and the values of Judaism, and the symbol of that clash was the pure light lit in the menorah after the purification of the Temple. That's why, even though in terms of the strict letter of the law they could have used impure oil to light the menorah, nevertheless for symbolic purposes it was very important that the oil be pure - the message was that there would now be a pure light shining forth from the Temple. Later the Romans invaded the Land of Israel and destroyed the Temple and burned it to the ground. The Greeks did not come to destroy the Temple but to defile it. They came to change it and divert its purpose to that of their own value system. A clash of values took place and what symbolised it was the light of the menorah that burned proclaiming that the light of Torah and these values will ultimately triumph even if from the perspective of the physical world it looks as if they shouldn't last. That tiny little jar should never have lasted. But it represented the purity of real values that can overcome the forces of evil in the world. That was the message of the life of Rav Aharon Kotler. He escaped the fires of the holocaust and all the evil of the destruction and the murder that was going on in Europe at the time. He came to America with nothing and built a place of learning from just a few students into more than 5000 today representing that little jar of oil that should have been extinguished but was able to burn on.

That was what G-d was telling Aaron at the time of the original dedication of the Tabernacle, in the desert; there will be another Chanukah and your descendants will be involved in that one that will be a light for all future generations; even after the destruction of the Temple, after the loss of sovereignty and after you think the light of Torah and G-d's Will and G-d's Wisdom and His Vision for the world will be extinguished, you should know that your descendants will be those who will keep that light alive and ensure that the light will burn forever. That is the eternal value of Chanukah, which is why we focus more on the menorah rather than on the physical battle. The physical battle was the means to the end of achieving the victory of the Torah's ideas and vision. It wasn't a physical war; a struggle for ideology is what it was all about. In that struggle of the ideologies is the message of Chanukah, which is a message for all future generations and which is why the festival of Chanukah arose.

Not every miracle in Jewish history gave rise to a festival. Many miracles have taken place in our history. The Talmud relates that in the First Temple there were ten miracles taking place daily. The festival of Chanukah was established because it was not just about the particular miracle that took place; it was about a message which says that the light of G-d's Wisdom, Will and Truth will ultimately prevail. The situation may look bleak, and in physical terms it looks unlikely that this small jar of oil is going to last but that's been part of the message of Jewish history; that in terms of the physical laws of history and the physical laws of nature we should not exist. After all these years, the fact that we still do is a testimony to that little jar of oil that remained burning. Chanukah keeps alive the light of those ideals for all future generations.

### **The power of the righteous**

I was in Israel in the city of Bnei Brak where I met a man by the name of Rabbi Yitzchak Grodzinsky, the son of the late Rabbi Avraham Grodzinsky who was one of the leading rabbis in the Yeshiva of Szobotka in Lithuania. Rabbi Avraham Grodzinsky was in the Kovno Ghetto during the Nazi occupation of Europe during World War II and the conditions were terrible. I asked Rav Yitzchak Grodzinsky who survived the war whilst his father did not, how Rav Avraham maintained strength in the ghetto? What was his key to holding a community together, to leading and to drawing strength for himself? He said that his father had convened a regular meeting of the righteous and saintly leaders within the community of the Kovno Ghetto and that they would learn and study together the words of Torah, and would share ideas and draw strength from them because his philosophy of life was that from a core of righteousness can flow strength and upliftment for all and the capacity for salvation and for redemption. He gave me a copy of his father's book called *Torat Avraham* which had been published posthumously by his children. Rabbi Avraham Grodzinsky himself was murdered by the Nazis.

In the book, there are a number of essays on the festival of Chanukah. In one of the essays, Rabbi Avraham Grodzinsky refers to this philosophy of his life, of a group of righteous people who can make such an impact on the world. He refers to a passage in the Talmud in the Tractate Sanhedrin where the Talmud is looking at different categories of what is defined as heresy and lack of faith,

and one of the categories is of a person who doesn't believe in the power of the righteous - someone who asks how people of great moral, spiritual and intellectual standing benefit society. A person who doesn't believe in the power of the righteous to change the world and to make a difference commits a form of heresy says the Talmud in Sanhedrin. The Talmud refers to the very interesting dialogue that took place between Abraham and G-d about the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham asked G-d how He could destroy the righteous together with the Wicked and asked Him to save the cities. Eventually G-d said that if there were only ten people He would save the cities. But there weren't even ten righteous people in whose merit G-d could have saved the cities that were filled with evil. The Talmud in Sanhedrin says from there we have a principle that ten righteous people can save the world, can save the society around them, and that they have the power to uplift and to transform and to be a source of redemption and salvation for the societies in which they live. That is stated in the Talmud, and that was the philosophy of Rabbi Avraham Grodzinsky in the ghetto.

The message of Chanukah, and this relates to Rav Aharon Kotler's message, is that a small jar of oil can shed enough light to dispel the darkness of this world and to triumph over evil and destruction. That is the message too of Rabbi Avraham Grodzinsky's life. When I heard that from his son, I found it particularly inspiring and that is the inspiration of the festival of Chanukah. This helps us understand a passage in the Talmud. In the Book of Genesis we are told that in the beginning G-d created heaven and earth, but that before things were formed, "There was chaos and void, and darkness over the depth". The Talmud says that each phrase refers to various empires of evil that brought destruction to the world. "Chaos" refers to the Babylonian kingdom and "void" refers to the Median kingdom that governed the world at the time of the events of Purim. "Darkness" refers to the Greek Empire and "depth" to the Roman Empire and all of its destruction. What is interesting is that the Greek Empire is called "darkness". This alludes to its particular ideological darkness and to the fact that the war with the Greeks was an ideological war. So the lights of the Chanukah candle dispel that darkness. That's the message of Chanukah - that you can have a world which is often filled with chaos and void and darkness and endless depth, and in the middle of all that can come a little light that will ultimately triumph over all of that darkness and evil. That is the inspiring story of Chanukah, which is why we focus on a little jar of oil that is the symbol of it - and not the physical, military victory; we focus on the victory of the spirit, the victory of right over wrong.

When we look around us and see pain, destruction and forces of evil are gaining strength, we should never give up hope. The message of Chanukah is to stay loyal, do what you need to do and, in the teachings of Rabbi Avraham Grodzinsky, build from the inside out. All we need to do is build the righteousness from within; we must build a righteous family and community and then the light of that will radiate outwards. How will the light eventually defeat the forces of darkness? That we don't know because that's beyond the laws of the physical world and is something that we can't understand - that is like the oil burning for the eight days instead of just the one. But what we do know is that it will eventually happen.

The message of Chanukah is that light will eventually triumph over darkness. All we need to do is keep the light burning. We need to make sure that we are pure and quantity doesn't matter, but at the end of the day it is quality and purity which will ensure the ultimate victory.