

Parshat Miketz: "Beautiful"

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Chanukah is a holiday when we become very romantic about the miracle of the oil, about the formidable Greek army falling to an ill-equipped band of Jewish Maccabees, and about dreidels, latkes and sufganiyot. But if we look deeper, we find a harsher reality: the infighting among Jews was ongoing, we never regained full control over Israel from the Greeks and the Romans eventually sent us into our current exile.

Even the miracle of the oil is suspect, according to the devastating commentary of the Pnei Yehoshua in Mesechet Shabbat. He questions whether that miracle of Chanukah was even necessary, because of the rule that “Tumah Hutra B’tzibur”, impurity is not an impediment to a mitzvah performed in a public forum. The menorah lighting in the Beit Hamikdash was clearly a public service which had no absolute requirement for pure oil, rendering the entire Chanukah miracle superfluous!

The Pnei Yehoshua concludes that God showed a special kind of affection for the Jewish people, “Chavivin Yisrael”, by intentionally implementing a miracle that was not necessary -- a special gesture, a gift which became the miracle and holiday of Chanukah.

This message is also reflected in our Parsha, which is perhaps why the Parshiot about Yosef always come out at the same time of year as Chanukah. When the brothers return to Egypt with Binyamin, Ya'akov insists on sending carefully wrapped treats – balsam, honey, pistachios, and almonds – the way you would bring a small box of chocolate when you visit someone’s home. Considering the grave circumstances of their trip, it might seem that such gifts would be absurdly inappropriate, but Yaakov had good reason for this gesture.

Upon arrival in Egypt, the brothers tried to return the money they’d found in their bags after leaving the first time, but they were told, *No, we already have your money and God must have given you that money as a gift.* At that point, the brothers decided to present Yosef with Ya'akov's treats, perhaps because they finally understood what Ya'akov realized from the outset -- that this king was not a typical intimidating ruler; he was a sensitive person who was invested in

relationships. In other words, Yosef was a ruler in the same mold as God – a ruler who chooses connection and relationship over power plays.

This was Yosef's message to his brothers throughout their story, and why he waited so long to reveal himself. Yosef wanted them to acknowledge that Yaakov had a legitimate reason to value the beauty of "my wife" Rachel, as well as the beauty Yosef inherited as her first-born son. Like Chiba/affection, beauty is "Yiteira", a bonus, not a necessity. But the Torah understands the concept of "Yofi" to connote beauty that enhances relationships, in contrast to the shallow concept of beauty emphasized by the Greeks. There is a deeper beauty represented by the Greek's forefather Yefet, who was blessed by his father Noach to "dwell in the tents of Shem", to reside in the Shuls and Yeshivot of the Jewish people. Yosef tried to teach his brothers that the Torah is not simply a route to the bottom line; its essence is expressed when one engages in meaningful relationships.

Not only was the Chanukah miracle unnecessary, but the mitzvah we perform today is unnecessary as well. The Gemara teaches that the only requirement on Chanukah is to light one candle for an entire household for all 8 nights. At the next level, Mehadrin, everyone in the household lights one candle every night. And the highest level, Mehadrin min HaMehadrin, is our current halachic practice – for each night, we add one more candle. No other mitzvah is presented this way, with a hierarchy of choices. Why is Chanukah treated this way?

There are two perspectives about these levels of Mehadrin observance. One is the way the term "Mehadrin min HaMehadrin" is sometimes used today - it's the bottom line, an indication of stricter observance. But as Rashi teaches us, the true meaning of "Hadar" is reflected in the way it's used with an Etrog, "Pri Etz Hadar", where Hadar means not strict, but beautiful. At the level of "Mehadrin min HaMehadrin", the candles and the entire household become more beautiful.

Chanukah teaches us that we should not measure our deeds in this world only by the strictest letter of the law, or regard this world merely as a means to the World to Come. God is not simply about the bottom line. The value and purpose of the Jewish people lies in the bonds of relationship, community and caring we develop together. That is what makes Chanukah essential to the Jewish people, how it fills our lives with love, light and inner beauty, and why it is the holiday that makes us beautiful.

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