

Chanukah

BY RABBI DR. AKIVA TATZ



Chanukah was the showdown with Greece, the clash of cultures that would shape Western values until the end of history. The events of Chanukah took place when there were no longer prophets and therefore there is no book in Scripture that relates its events. In fact, Chanukah is so much part of the process of the Oral Law that it is not even mentioned in the Mishna; it is simply the subject of a discussion in the Gemara.¹

Chanukah celebrates the breaking through of the miraculous into a non-miraculous world. Greece taught the world to see with material eyes only; it was concerned with stamping out the spiritual vision of Israel. Greece made no attempt to annihilate the Jews; its quarrel was not with

Jews but with Judaism. The war with the Greeks was a war of ideology – Greece was concerned with foisting its worldview on reality for all time, and the heroes of the Chanukah revolt were ready to give their lives for a very different view of reality.

Chanukah celebrates the victory of their transcendent worldview. The battle between Greece and Israel was a cosmic battle between the natural and the supernatural. The last revealed miracle of history, the miracle of the oil, was a demonstration that the supernatural lives on.

Chanukah has no *megilla*, and although the miracle of Chanukah was an open miracle, it has features of the phase of the Oral Law. The miracle of the war, like the miracle of Purim, did not manifest open abrogations of na-

ture, and in fact required strenuous human effort – a bitter war fought against the Greek Empire that eventually dragged on for years, during which four of the five heroic sons of Mattityahu died. The victory was certainly miraculous: a small band of priests wrested victory from a mighty armed empire, but the war featured no overt change in nature and great human effort was required – these are features of the post-prophetic era.

The overtly supernatural miracle of the oil was private, in the inner precincts of the Temple, utterly unlike the public spectacle of Biblical miracles. It was not a miracle of salvation; it occurred *after* the main stage of the military victory, and it occurred with no prophet present – unlike Biblical miracles. This, the last² miracle that

we witnessed, was transitional – overtly miraculous like the miracles of the Biblical phase, but its defining features were those of the post-Biblical type of miracle. Chanukah carries the flame of the memory of open revelation into the long darkness of hidden Providence.

It is not accidental that the protagonists of the Chanukah battle were *kohanim* (priests). *Kohanim* stand between two worlds; Maharal points out that the name “*kohen*” signifies the interface between physical and spiritual: *kohen* is equal to seventy-five in *gematria*; a hint at the midpoint between seven and eight, that is between the numbers that represent the natural and the transcendent. *Kohanim* stand between G-d and the people, representing

each to the other – the Gemara (Yoma 19a) questions whether the *kohanim* are *shluchei d'Rachmana* (agents of G-d) or *shluchei di'dan* (agents of ours) – the question is whether they represent G-d to us, or us to G-d. In fact, they serve both functions (the debate is only which is primary). That is precisely the role of the *kohanim*: they are agents of connection to the spiritual. They serve in the Temple, the place of this world's connection to a higher world. They bridge the gap, and it was *kohanim* who led the Chanukah revolt – Greece asserts that the gap is unbridgeable; G-d may have created the world, but He is now no longer in contact with it. The High Priests of the Chashmonaim demonstrated exactly that ongoing connection. Chanukah was the bridging event of history; it joins the previous miraculous era with the era of nature's reluctance to reveal.

HEALING OF THE LEGS

Purim and Chanukah straddle the divide. They are the bookends of the phase of transition – each has features of the revealed and the hidden: the Purim miracle occurred within the phase of the revealed but its nature was that of hidden miracles. Prophets were present and Purim saved the Jewish people, these are features of the miracles of the prophetic era, but no supernatural event occurred. The miracle of the Chanukah oil occurred in the phase of the hidden but its nature was that of the revealed. No prophet was present, and it played no part in saving the Jewish people, but it was a supernatural event. Purim saw the last ebb of the first phase; Chanukah introduced the second.

Purim ends the phase of the Written Law, Chanukah begins the phase of the Oral Law. Together they draw the Written into the Oral. They are

the legs of Jewish history (Purim the right leg, Chanukah the left).³ Here the body ends: Purim and Chanukah do not have the sanctity of Biblical festivals with their prohibition of work; they are external, like the legs that are external to the body proper. But like the legs, they are the agents that carry the body forward. Torah stands on them and walks on them – we move into the future in an ongoing creative process of Torah in the Oral Law that extends the Written.

Mattityahu the High Priest, who began the revolt against the Greeks that became the miracle of Chanukah, achieved a partial correction of a problem that had begun long before. Arizal

the Messianic era. Rome propagated Greek culture; it was not a culture unto itself so much as a power based solidly on Greek roots that spread those roots in the world. We are in the grip of Rome, but the driving culture behind Rome is Greece. Esau dominates us with his power and the ideology of Greece. When the Chashmonaim defeated the Greeks, the healing of Jacob's thigh began. Torah was mortally threatened – Jews were defecting *en masse* to Greek culture, enthralled by the beauty and power of the Hellenistic ideal. Torah's journey into the future faced a dire threat. The Chashmonaim met that threat and overcame it – and healed the

boundaries of human knowledge – but always limited to the dimensions of the world, never reaching beyond it. And Greece could have done it: in the post-prophetic world the open evidence was all on their side, the tools they had for the job were exquisitely beautiful, and Jews were adopting them enthusiastically.

The Chashmonaim held back a colossal tide; with their self-sacrifice in a world that offered nothing to aid them they did battle with a mighty army and a mighty culture. Unexpectedly they were met by a miracle, a supernatural light that shone briefly in the natural world. But that was enough. Jews are here to declare that the material world is not the sum total of reality, and those heroes demonstrated that even in the post-prophetic darkness an avenue of access to a higher light can be found.

They revealed that the world is not disconnected. Faith lives on; the darkness may be almost overwhelming but as long as a small flame shines in a Jewish window at Chanukah the world remembers that the natural is not everything. A secular culture dominates, and it will dominate until the Messianic destiny is revealed. But in that secular and materialistic reality another message can be heard, and it will continue until the end of history when it will be vindicated. ▲

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states that when Jacob fought with Esau's angel and suffered an injury to his thigh, a weakness set into the Jewish people that would run through history. That injury would remain with us as a vulnerability to Esau for centuries. Chanukah effected something of a correction, a healing in the cosmic body of the Jewish people.

(The verse states: “*Vayiga b'kaf yerecho vateka kaf yerech Yaakov* – And he smote his thigh and the thigh of Yaakov was injured.” Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld noted that “*vayiga* – he smote” is equal to “Chanukah” in *gematria*, and “*kaf yerecho* – his thigh” is equal to “Purim.”)

Esau injures Jacob's thigh; that gives Esau a particular power over us. Esau is the progenitor of Rome, the Empire that will dominate until

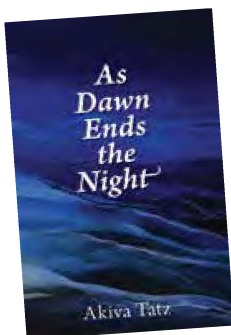
legs of Jewish history. We continue the journey; still lame, perhaps, but still walking.

The battle with Greece was the battle to assert the culture that would define mankind. Greece aimed to permanently sever any connection with a higher reality, to define the world forever as a system devoid of all relationship with the Absolute. A world formed in the Greek image would have been merely human; world culture would have included no opening to transcendence, no possibility of reaching beyond the boundaries of human philosophy or the finite dimensions of the material. Great and glorious to be sure; intellectually mighty, aesthetically inspired, encompassing all of science and technology and always expanding the

¹ The section in the Talmud discussing the Chanukah lights is inserted in a discussion of Shabbat lights (Shabbat 21a). Shabbat represents a process that is entirely given from above, it is *k'viya v'kayma* – fixed and permanent (Pesachim 117b); in no way subject to human adjustment. Chanukah is entirely a process generated from below. Both light the world – together.

² There was one revealed miracle after Chanukah: the dead of Beitar, who lay exposed due to a Roman edict prohibiting their burial, miraculously did not decompose and were eventually brought to burial. That last of all miracles was a premonition of the redemption, a hint from Above that the dead will ultimately be revived.

³ Arizal, Shaar HaKavanot; Meor Eynaim, Haazinu.



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