

Chanuka

Opening Thoughts

A common tradition during Chanuka is giving out gifts and "Chanuka Gelt" (money). What is the source for this tradition and what can be learned from it?

The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson writes in his book, *Shaarei Halachah Uminhag*, 283: Jewish tradition (law) is that during the days of Chanuka, Chanuka money is given to the children.... and this tradition is connected to education... when you want to educate a child, but he is distanced, one must educate him through many gifts given to him. Since Chanuka is the time of the renewal of the Torah, following the decrees of the Greeks who wanted to cause the Torah to be forgotten. And when you teach him, you give him coins. The Lubavitcher Rebbe connects the tradition to education. Another reason for the tradition can be learned from the words of the Magen Avraham and from Rabbi Yissachar Dov, the Rebbe of Belz. Magen Avraham wrote simply: "The poor customarily go from door to door on Chanuka" (*Orach Chaim*, introduction to 670).

The Belz Rebbe adds an explanation:

Since the halacha is that even a poor person who earns his living from charity lends or sells his garment to purchase oil to light...as the reason for the mitzva of Chanuka candle lighting and the four cups of Passover is to publicize the miracle, and when one does not fulfill the mitzva the miracle is not publicized by him and thus he has not fulfilled his obligation. Therefore, there is a tradition of giving Chanuka coins to the poor so that they too can fulfill the mitzva. However, in order not to embarrass those who are in need, the tradition is to give Chanuka coins to others as well.

If so, the Chanuka money is not given only to children but mainly to the poor, and in order not to embarrass them, it is also given to others.

From these two reasons – encouraging Torah study and giving charity – we also learn about the characteristics of Chanuka. "The whole world stands on three things: Torah, the service of God, and deeds of kindness" (*Pirkei Avot* 1:2). So too does the small world of each and every individual. Therefore, when dedicating our own homes, and more so when dedicating God's home, we aim to include these elements – Torah study, acts of kindness to others and teaching children to care for the needs and feelings of others.

Learning and good deeds add light to the world. May we see the light of God shining brightly during this holiday, heralding the coming of the Mashiach.

Sources and Questions for Discussion

The Name of the Holiday

And that is why the scholars of that generation decreed that these days, beginning on the twenty fifth of Kislev, will be days of joy and praise... and these days are called Chanuka. (Rambam, laws of Megilla and Chanuka, 3:3)

- What other names are there for the holiday? What name would you choose and why?

Ever Increasing or Ever Decreasing

My grandfather explained the disagreement between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, whether one adds or reduces the number candles on each successive night, by saying that a candle has the attributes of light and burning. It burns away the waste and lights up the internal essence of the person – the fiery passion for God. Beit Shammai believed that one must keep away from bad, therefore one should reduce the number of candles. However, Beit Hillel believed that one must add, so the enthusiasm lighting one up purifies the body, thus inevitably burning up the waste... These really are two ways [to approach the purification of the soul] – either by conquering the physical body or by strengthening the inner soul. These are the meanings behind the approaches of Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel. (*Sfat Emet*, Bereishit, Chanuka, 5654)

- When we look at the society around us, what do we see – the waste that must be burned, or the light which must be spread?



The Inner Essence of the Hellenistic War

The main battle the Greeks waged was against the spirituality and divinity in the Torah and the Mitzvot. As it says [in *Al HaNissim*], "to make them forget Your Torah and violate the decrees of Your will." The Greeks did not mind so much having the Jews learn Torah, but they wanted the Torah learning to be an intellectual exercise in Torah wisdom, "for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the people" and in this manner to make them forget that the Torah is from God. (*Likutei Sichot*, *Vayeishev*)

- Is learning which does not bring us closer to God and is not practically teaching us how to fulfill the mitzvot always negative?
- How can the light in the world be strengthened through Torah learning?

The Miracle of the Righteous and the Pure

'You delivered the mighty into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous, and the wanton sinners into the hands of those who occupy themselves with Your Torah.' Apparently, 'the mighty into the hands of the weak' is a miracle, and 'the many into the hands of the few' is also a Divine miracle, but 'the wicked into the hands of the righteous' and 'the impure into the hands of the pure' - what is the miracle and what can we learn from this? (*Kedushat Levi*, *Kedushot for Chanuka* 5)

- What do you think is the miracle of 'the wicked into the hands of the righteous and the impure into the hands of the pure'?
- Is 'the many into the hands of the few and the mighty into the hands of the weak' necessarily a miracle? Is this the reason we also need the miracle of the oil in order to establish a holiday for generations?