

# Chanukah: The Celebration of Chesed

א"ר אלעזר מאי דכתיב (משלי לא, כו) פיה פתחה בחכמה ותורת חסד על לשונה וכי יש תורה של חסד ויש תורה שאינה של חסד ... איכא דאמרי תורה ללמדה זו היא תורה של חסד שלא ללמדה זו היא תורה שאינה של חסד.



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R. Elazar said, *What is the meaning of the verse, "Her mouth opens with wisdom and a Torah of compassion (torat chesed) is on her tongue"? Is there is a Torah that is compassionate and a Torah that is not compassionate? ... There are those that say, [learning] Torah to teach others is Torah of compassion and [learning] without intent to teach others is Torah without compassion.*

**Sukkah 49b**

**T**here is a very significant difference between secular law and Torah law. Regarding secular law, the Mishna in *Avos* (3:2) tells us that "one is to pray on behalf of the government (in the land in which they live), as without their laws, one would swallow another alive." Secular law maintains law and order while providing individuals their inalienable rights and protections. Torah law, by sharp contrast, is not only inclusive of the former — *sur me'rah*, preventing

one from damaging and inflicting harm on another — but also includes *asei tov*; Torah law not only legislates, it refines. A few examples: The mitzvos of *leket*, *shikcha* and *pe'ah*, agricultural mitzvos that apply in the Land of Israel, in which gleanings and forgotten bundles and a corner of the field are to be left for the poor. The *Chinuch* (216) explains that Hashem wants His nation to be crowned with good character and a generous spirit. He therefore legislated these mitzvos.

## The Five Torot of Yeshiva University

TORAT EMET

TORAT CHAIM

TORAT ADAM

**TORAT CHESED**

TORAT TZION

The Jewish farmer was not born good, he was transformed by the mitzvos to be a good person.

The Torah itself begins and ends with *chesed*, acts of kindness. In chapter 3 of Bereishis, Hashem Himself clothes Adam and Eve, and the Torah closes with Hashem personally burying Moshe. The Vilna Gaon teaches that one can get a good understanding of the nature of a book by noting its beginning and end.

Moreover, while the Torah has many mitzvos that take into account *tza'ar ba'alei chaim*, sensitivities and feelings of animals, it legislates one Jew to assist another, and gives it higher priority than *tza'ar ba'alei chaim*. There is no law in our beloved United States that a citizen must stop to assist a stranger to fix a flat tire. The Torah legislates that one is to assist a Jew in loading an animal — *teinah* — and in helping to unload a load that has been dislodged and causes pain to the animal — *perika*. However, the Talmud, *Bava Metziah* (32b), teaches that one must help an enemy load his animal prior to helping a friend unload his animal, even if the latter has an additional aspect of *tza'ar ba'alei chaim*. This is in order to refine one's character by legislating that he help his enemy, and thereby subdue his negative inclination.

It is interesting to note that the term used extensively in the Talmud referring to the Torah is *Rachmana*, meaning the Merciful One. Constantly the Torah is referred to as a work of mercy and compassion.

*Olam chesed yibaneh*, the world is built upon *chesed* (Tehillim 29:3), and extending *chesed*. Reading Parshas Noach a few months ago, we could ask the following question: The entire floating zoo was a combination of

many miracles. To begin, the Torah gives us the dimensions of the ark — its length, approximately the size of one-and-a-half football fields — which at first glance seems quite large. However, the Ramban in his commentary (6:19) teaches that, in reality, 10 arks of this size could not contain all the animals, birds and their food supply for the year. So why does the Gemara in *Sanhedrin* (108b) teach that Noach and his children were busy around the clock feeding the animals? Why didn't Hashem perform another

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miracle that once a week, Noach would deposit food into an automatic feeder? Then he would have the rest of the time for himself — if not R&R, then for introspection and reflection upon the colossal task that awaited him, to rebuild the world.

The answer given is that since the world was destroyed because it was full of "*chomas*" — violence — Noach had to lay the foundation of the new world by extending *chesed* 24/7 to the animals. In so doing, he created positive energy upon which the new world order would be established.

There is an internal struggle and dialectic that ideally we should all consider, namely our allocation of time and energy. On the one hand Hillel, in *Avos* (1:14) teaches, "If

I am not for myself, who will be for me?" But on the other hand, continues Hillel, "If I am for myself, who am I?" The first time around, I am learning the Daf Yomi with just the text, the second time with Tosfos, the third with Maharsha. Who has time for others? In addition, I have an obligation to support and nurture my family, who has time for others? Thus the question of how we are to allocate our time and resources, suggest both Rav Shimon Shkop zt"l in his introduction to the *Shaarei Yosher* and Rav Moshe Feinstein zt"l, *Igros Moshe*, E.H. 4:26 (4), is that ideally we should give a tenth of our time and resources to others, to the community. This resolution ideally creates the environment for my personal growth and for that of my family, while at the same time requiring me to contribute to society. Thus a Jew does *chesed* not only to fulfill the 611<sup>th</sup> mitzvah, that of *v'halachta b'drachav* — to emulate His ways (Devarim 28:9) and to fulfill *bikur cholim* — visiting the sick, and *nichum aveilim* — comforting the mourners, as He did and does. The Jew does *chesed* as a fulfillment of the mitzvah of *v'ahavta l're'acha kamocho* — loving our fellow as ourselves (Vayikra 19:18), which Rabbi Akiva taught was a mainstay of Torah.

Interestingly, there is a *Toras Chesed*, literally a Torah of "how to." Just as the *Shulchan Aruch* is a manual for how to observe Shabbos and kashrus, our rich mesorah provides direction in how to perform *chesed*. The Chofetz Chaim in his *Ahavas Chesed* (Book 3 Chapter 7) teaches that *chesed* itself needs to be done in a manner reflecting *chesed*, and often ingenuity. You can assist in a manner that helps the recipient, but at the same time compromises his dignity; or you can assist in a way in which the recipient literally believes

he is helping you by accepting. A classic example: You go to the supermarket and buy a case of canned goods. You come home and take a hammer and slightly damage each can enough to tell the needy neighbor that they sold this case at an extremely low price because of the “damaged goods”; the neighbor gets a bargain, and you performed a mitzvah in the highest way possible.

There are numerous connections between Chanukah and *chesed*. To begin with, we find regarding Chanukah the unusual halacha that even if one is destitute, he is to fulfill the mitzvah of ner Chanukah, even if it means selling his garment or begging for assistance (*Orach Chaim* 671:1). This breaks most of the rules. If we are obligated to fulfill a positive mitzvah, we must spend up to one fifth of our possessions, but we are not required to beg for funds (*Orach Chaim* 656). Why is ner Chanukah different? An answer suggested by the Rav zt”l, is that the entire environment of Chanukah is rooted in Hashem acting with us *lifnim meshuras hadin* — above and beyond the letter of the law. In reality, there was no need for the miracle of the *pach shemen*. We won the war, defeated the Greeks, freed the Temple from those who had violated it; those miracles could have been sufficient. Moreover, we could have used impure oil to light the Menorah as *tumah hutra b'tzibur* — the rules of ritual impurity are waived for communal offerings. The miracle of the Menorah was in actuality a Divine wink showing the Jewish people that He is not only there to preserve the Jewish nation as He swore to do, but that He has a warm, special relationship with us.

מחוץ לפרוכת העדות יערוך וכי לאורה הוא צריך והלא כל ארבעים שנה שהלכו בני ישראל במדבר לא הלכו אלא לאורו אלא עדות היא לבאי עולם שהשכינה שורה בישראל מאי עדות אמר רב זו נר מערבי שנותן בה שמן כמדת חברותיה וממנה היה מדליק ובה היה מסיים.

*With regard to the Temple candelabrum, it is stated: “Outside the veil of the testimony, in the Tent of Meeting, shall Aaron order it from evening to morning before the Lord continually; it shall be a statute forever throughout your generations” (Leviticus 24:3). It must be understood: And does God require its light for illumination at night? Didn’t the children of Israel, all forty years that they walked in the wilderness, walk exclusively by His light, the pillar of fire? Rather, the lighting of the candelabrum is testimony to mankind that the Divine Presence rests among Israel. The Gemara asks: What is this testimony? Rav said: That is the westernmost lamp in the candelabrum in which the measure of oil placed was the same measure of oil as was placed in the other lamps, and nevertheless he would light the others from it each day and with it he would conclude, i.e., the westernmost lamp would continue burning throughout the day after all the others were extinguished.*

**Shabbat 22b (Translation: The William Davidson digital edition of the Koren Noé Talmud)**

When the Beit Hamikdash was in full function, there was a daily miracle visible at the Menorah, whereby the *ner maaravi*, the westernmost candle, burned continually, outlasting the other six branches though the same amount of oil was placed therein. This provided testimony to all that the Divine presence dwelled in the Jewish nation. The miracle of the Menorah conveyed this message again.

The 611th mitzvah of *v’halachta b’drachav* prescribes that we follow and emulate Hashem’s behavior. He went above and beyond the call of duty, and we must do so as well. Therefore, we require the poor person to beg for funds in order to fulfill this mitzvah which, in turn, enables the community to fulfill its duty of *chesed* in an “above and beyond” manner. Moreover, it is fascinating to note that the *Magen Avraham* begins his commentary on Chanukah not by addressing a specific law of Chanukah but by publicizing an established custom that the poor young men of the community would go from door to door, home to home to receive charity on Chanukah — Chanukah gelt. He does not explain why or how this practice originated. Perhaps, in keeping with the rationale of the Rav, as Hashem went beyond the letter of the law with us, we respond in kind by extending kindness to others. [Others including *Responsa Imrei Kohain* (38) suggest that as the Rambam teaches, *Hilchos Chanukah* (3:2), that part of the Greek oppression was that they confiscated our wealth, now that we have some resources the practice was to do *tzedakah* and *chesed* with it.]

In addition, the Arizal writes that at the time of the lighting of the Menorah, ideally, we should keep in mind the 13 Middos — the Attributes of Mercy. This further suggests, as found in the Talmud, *Rosh Hashana* (17b), that we should not only recite these Middos, but *ya’asu l’fanai* — we should perform and actualize these principles. Thus, the minhag of the needy coming to the “doors of the community” might well signify the following: The door is now surrounded by the mezuzah on one side and the Chanukah lights on the other. The mezuzah testifies to

Hashem's existence and the Chanukah lights testify to His care and embrace for us. We emulate His care for us by showing and extending *ahavas Yisrael* — love for a fellow Jew.

Interestingly, the Koshnitzer Maggid in his *Avodas Yisrael* understands the *Magen Avraham's* choice in the word “*na'ar*” — young men — approaching the homes for charity as referring to individuals in the category of “*na'ar*,” i.e. those who are not yet educated and observant. The minhag of giving Chanukah gelt is to extend the teachings of Chanukah to others. Understandably, the mitzvah of returning a lost object is Biblical, but the most precious lost object one can return is “*v'hashevos lo*” (Devarim 22:2)— returning the person to himself, that is, connecting his soul with its Donor.

There are, I believe, three ways that the holiday of Chanukah and the virtue of *chesed* coalesce. First, the Talmud, *Shabbos* (122a), teaches that *ner le'chad ner l'meah* — a single candle initially lit for one person — can in fact benefit countless others. Moreover, the fact that others benefit from his candle in no way detracts from his enjoyment. Similarly, when one does *chesed*, be it to one or to 100 beneficiaries, it does not detract from the donor and indeed, most often comes back to enhance and enrich the donor. There is a boomerang effect of *chesed*. The Shalah Hakadosh writes in his commentary at the end of *Pesachim*, that when we go out of our way to perform a *chesed*, Hashem goes out of His way and goes *lifnim meshuras hadin* for us. He therefore urges that we should consciously perform at least one *chesed* per day be it *b'gufo*, *b'mamono*, or *b'nafsho*, with our body, our money or our soul. He bases this on Tehillim (52:3) *chesed*

*Kel kol hayom* — the kindness of Hashem is the entire day. The *baalei mussar* suggest that we should keep a *chesed* diary not for anyone else to see, not to raise our ego, but to properly challenge ourselves to perform *chesed* daily and not to rest on yesterday's laurels and accomplishments. The *ner Chanukah* is lit at the entrance of our home in full view for all to see. We are lighting it to fulfill our personal mitzvah, but in so doing we are also affecting — effecting — the many others who see our light.

Second, *ner Chanukah* is different in that most mitzvos can be performed privately. There is no greater mitzvah in lighting Shabbos candles if your drapes are opened and the passersby can see the lights of Shabbos. The Chanukah lights, by definition, are lit to share with others. To publicize, to reinforce the celebration, to add more light in the dark night of winter. Your lighting your lights in full view of others is an act of *chesed* that is an integral part of the mitzvah.

Finally, there is the exciting question of the *Beis Yosef*: why, indeed, is Chanukah celebrated for eight days when there was sufficient oil for one day and thus the holiday should be but seven days? Among the many answers is that the first day's lighting is *tevah* — a natural phenomenon — while the subsequent seven days are supernatural in nature. The Rabbis however ordained that we celebrate eight days as a unit to elevate the natural and connect it to the supernatural. To recognize that the natural phenomenon of oil burning is not to be taken for granted but is only because Hashem has enabled oil to burn. Hence, to recognize that even the natural is indeed supernatural in nature.

Similarly, when you do a positive



action on your own behalf, that is natural. However, if your intention and desire are motivated to benefit others, then even your own actions are also elevated and become part and parcel with those of the supernatural, helping others. Your focus on *v'ahavta l're'acha kamocho* elevates your personal activities done on your own behalf to become merged with the lofty activities of *chesed* as the end goal. Hence your seemingly mundane activities are now raised to fulfill *b'chol d'rachecha da'ehu* — to know and incorporate Hashem in all of your actions (Mishlei 3:6).

On a personal note, it is my honor to offer President Berman shlit”a, a beracha on this Chanukah, which as we mentioned has roots in *chesed*. May you be blessed to emulate the manner of our great teacher Moshe. The Talmud, *Menachos* (53b) teaches:

יבא טוב ויקבל טוב מטוב לטובים.

*Let good come to receive good from good for those who are good.*

Understood by the Talmud to mean that Moshe — regarding whom we are taught that his mother saw he was *good* — received *good* referring to the Torah, from *good* — referring to Hashem, for those who are *good* — referring to the children of Israel. May your tenure reflect all of the above “goods.”