

"MEMAAYAN HACHAIM"

Mussar talks from the Masgiach Rabbi Chaim Walkin shlita

"In the days of ...": Everyone Has His Moment, Which Educates Him and Leads Him to Fulfill His Unique Purpose in Life

During the holiday of Chanukah we say the prayer of thanksgiving established by our Sages in our liturgy and in Grace after Meals, "Al Ha-nissim", "For the miracles . . ." "The first words of this poem of thanks are: "In the days of Mattisyahu the Hasmonean and his sons . . .". Similarly, on the holiday of Purim, we say, "In the days of Mordecai and Esther in the Persian capital of Shushan . . ." In these two paeans of gratitude, we are struck by the conspicuous introductory phrase, "In the days of ..." We understand that the Torah is not simply a work of history, revealing to us what happened at a particular place and time. What, then, can be the intent of the intentional stress by our Sages, just during the holidays of Chanukah and Purim, to introduce Al HaNissim with the time-marker, "In the days of. . ." "!? What is the lesson, the deeper idea being conveyed here?

We can explain this based on the words of the Yaavetz in the introduction to his Siddur, "Bais Yaakov": All of the memories of the ancient national powers are forgotten, their intellectual accomplishments ignored, their spiritual force dissipated, but we, those who cling to Hashem are all alive today. In the entire length of the long, difficult exile we have not lost neither a consonant or a vowel of our written Torah. By my soul, as I think into these wonders, they seem to me to be greater than all of the miracles and marvels which Hashem May He be Blessed did for our forefathers in Egypt, the Desert, and in the land of Israel. The longer this exile continues, this miracle reveals its truth, expressing the Almighty's strength and power.

Rav Emden, zt"l, writes here that the wonderful miracle of the survival of the Jewish nation is so great

that he considers it greater than "all of the miracles and marvels which Hashem did for our forefathers in Egypt". This eternal miracle continues as the exile persists, a result of the promise and covenant the Holy One Blessed be He made with our forefathers, ". . . even in the land of your enemies, I will not despise nor abhor them to destroy them and to break my covenant with them (Vayikra 26:44). This contract guarantees the continuity of the Jewish people's physical and spiritual existence, and it is the source of the strength of the permanence and ongoing survival of the eternal Jewish nation.

As the Gemora (Megilla 11a) says, "I will not despise" this refers to the days of the Chaldeans, when I placed Daniel, Chananiah, Mishael, and Azariah to lead them; 'I will not abhor' this refers to the days of the Greeks, when I placed Shimon HaTzadik the Hasmonean and his sons, and Mattisyahu the Kohen Gadol to save them; 'to destroy them', this refers to the days of Haman, when I lifted up Mordecai and Esther to save them . . . " We see from this passage how every generation in which the Jewish people are confronted with difficulties, to the extent that it would seem that the spark of the nation was going to be extinguished, nonetheless, the Almighty arranged individuals to arise and save them and bring salvation. From the very beginning, Hashem had "raised up and placed" the appropriate individuals appointed from above to ensure that the future of the Jewish people was secure, to guarantee it not be wiped off the face of the earth. All of this—a result of the fulfillment of the covenant, the promise Hashem made: "I will not despise you, not abhor you, to destroy you" so that your memory will never be forgotten, an eternal survival both physically and spiritually.

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This is the explanation here, the deeper principle being taught by the Sages' use of the temporal marker, "in the days of"—"b'yemei". Not simply an identifier of a particular historical time period, but rather, a revelation of a profound Divine providence of the Creator to fulfill His promise, a covenant to be concerned for the eternity of the Torah. He who "sees history from the beginnings of the generations" fore-ordained from the outset of time the appropriate people and positioned them to save the Torah and the Jewish people in every time of challenge. The connotation of "b'yemei", "in the days of..." is just "the days which were destined for punishment and the potential destruction of the Am Yisrael, but they also had within them the potential for unique individuals to arise to save the nation and prevent the punishment." Hence, it is most significant that the Sages chose to begin the text of the liturgic poems of thanksgiving specifically on Chanukah and Purim, periods in our history of punishment and potential destruction, physically and spiritually, and when the Holy One Blessed be He, guarded His promise and prepared for the Jewish nation those special people to prevent that evil decree.

Further, from this explanation we can learn another profound insight into the fulfillment of a person's personal mission in the world. Just as we see that there is a "b'yemei", an "in the days of" for the nation as a whole, where the Almighty prepared individuals to lead and inspire them, thus preventing the punishment, so too there is a "b'yemei" in the life of the individual. As the Al HaNissim prayer says, "B'yemei Mattisyahu ben Yochanan", there was a time especially designated for Mattisyahu ben Yochanan the Kohen Gadol and the Hasmoneans themselves to come and fulfill their personal missions prepared for them by their Creator! We must realize from here, there is a "b'yemei" destined for each and every one of us, the unique moment prepared for him to execute his potential and accomplish the task the Almighty placed him in this world to do, with his unique abilities, in his unique environment.

Rabbeinu Yonah, in Shaarei Teshuva (Shaar 2, paragraph 21) writes: "He who Hashem has blessed with wisdom, must focus his heart and mind to the task Hashem has placed him in this world to accomplish, to fulfill Hashem's Torah, laws, and

commandments, to open his eyes solely to the mission he was created to fulfill." Not only Daniel, Mordecai, or Esther, but each and every one of us have a mission in this world, a "shlichus" we have been given by Hashem, whether it be a "shlichus" to save an entire nation, or whether this mission is focused on a small, personal goal. In the final analysis—we are all His messengers. We all have a "sender" who sends us out with our mission into the world, who has from our very beginning prepared us for our job, with the correct background, environment, and abilities to successfully execute our mission when our time, our "b'yemei" comes. We must fulfill our purpose, so we can "return words of truth to our sender", so we can return and tell He who sent us, "we have executed our mission, our purpose—we have fulfilled that potential inherent in our "moment", our "b'yemei"".



"Peace of Mind"

The Gemora (Shabbos 21b) relates concerning the establishment of the holiday of Chanukah: "When the Greeks entered into the Sanctuary of the Temple, they render all of the flasks of pure olive oil impure... (the Hasmoneans) only found a single flask sealed with the seal of the Kohen Gadol, enough for one night. . . a miracle occurred and they lit the menorah from that flask for eight days. The next year, the Sages established a holiday and made it for days of praise and thanksgiving."

We thought to ask—what is the difference between the establishment of the holiday of Chanukah, which only was set up "the next year", and the establishment of the holiday of Purim, where the text of Al HaNissim states that they "established and fulfilled upon themselves" (trans. Heb."kiyamu v'kiblu alayhem) immediately, in that same year. Why the difference, why the wait by Chanukah?

We can explain based on the Gemora (Megilla 14a): "The act of the removal of Achashverosh's signet ring is greater (in terms of inspiring the Jewish people to repent) than the spiritual exhortations of Forty eight prophets and seven prophetesses who prophesized to Israel. All of their prophesy did not succeed in causing them to repent, while the fear engendered by the removal of the ring (and it being

given to Haman—trans.) did inspire the Jewish people to change their ways for the good.” We see from this passage an amazing insight—while the combined spiritual attainments of forty-eight prophets and seven prophetesses did not succeed in getting the Jewish people to change their ways, a seemingly small, relatively insignificant action such as the giving of the King’s signet ring to Haman did succeed in causing the Jews to do teshuva. The explanation may be the following: the words of the Mesilas Yesharim are well known—a person’s situation in this world is like that of someone standing in a waiting room before the world-to-come. All actions in this world are directed to decisions for good, for fulfilling G-d’s will, in order to elevate both man and those actions in the process. While this is the truth, man often tends to live in his fantasies—he thinks that his situation in this world is the manor house, not the waiting room, and his position in it are permanent. In the words of the Holy Zohar: “a person walks in this world and imagines it is his, and that he will live in it forever.”

However, in a moment, when he is confronted by terror, when he faces death head-on, the sham explodes before him and the truth hidden in his heart emerges. At that moment, a person takes a sober look at his life of fantasies and reconnects to the inner truth which lies at the depth of his personal mission. This is what is being described by the Gemora as “the act of the removal of the King’s signet ring is greater than the efforts of forty-eight prophets and seven prophetesses”—the removal of the ring possesses the terror sufficient to “sober up” the fantasy-driven Jewish nation and bring them to the reality of their Creator’s task for them.

We wanted to suggest an additional insight: besides the clarity brought about by the “impending death experience”, such an encounter will also simultaneously bring a sense of serenity (heb. Yishuv ha-daas—transl.), which will provide him with the clarity to institute commemorations and rules which will maintain this state for an extended period.

With these assumptions, we can clarify our question above. The time of Purim was such a “near-death” situation, the “removal of the King’s signet” struck terror into the collective heart of the Jewish people

sufficient to cause them to turn over a new leaf, to change their behavior for the good. In turn, this experience created in them the necessary clarity to know how to establish the rules and ordinances (transl.-- kiyamu v’kiblu immediately, that same year) to maintain this recognition of the truth over an extended period. However, in the days of Chanukah, the physical battles continued over a long period of time, a drawn-out exposure to national disaster. During war, a person is not himself. For this reason, perhaps, the Gemora tells us that during the wars of acquisition of the lands of Israel, pork loins were permitted to the soldiers to maintain their physical strength. They did not possess the peace-of-mind necessary to withstand the temptation of these forbidden foods. Thus, while there was great personal self-sacrifice during the Hasmonean revolts, they perhaps did not have the requisite serenity and clarity of mind to properly establish the ways to memorialize the miracles they experienced. Hence, they waited, as the Talmud in Shabbos relates, to another year.



There is a well-known analysis in Shabbos 22b, whether the mitzva of lighting the Chanukah lights is in the lighting itself, or whether the mitzva is fulfilled by placing the lit menorah in the correct location.

To explain this discussion in the Talmudic text according to the insights of the Mussar, we thought to suggest that the idea of lighting the menorah corresponds to the enthusiasm in performing the commandment. On the other hand, placing the lit menorah in the correct location corresponds to the peace-of-mind, the serenity engendered by the fulfillment of Hashem’s will. The discussion in Shabbos turns on the following question: service of the Almighty requires energy, enthusiasm to push a person past his natural physical lethargy. However, one also needs clarity, the idea of focus in that service. The Gemora is questioning what is more fundamental for Divine Service? Is it the emotional inspiration, or perhaps, the sober serenity necessary to maintain one’s spiritual focus? In the final analysis, we of course need both aspects of our Divine Service, first the energy to move past our lazy nature,

and then the presence to focus of the lessons derived from the fulfillment of the mitzva.

I once heard a sweet explanation from Horav Hagaon R' Gedalia Eiseman zt"l., in the name of the Rebbe of Rozhin, zt"l. We refer to Hashem in our prayers as "... He who chooses the hymns of song. . . " (heb. shirei zimra). In addition to the simple, literal meaning, we can also understand a deeper connotation in this phrase. The word for hymns can be read with an additional yud, making it to imply the word "remainders i.e. the emotions left over from the singing experience" (not "shirei" hymns of, but "shiyarei" remainders). With this reading, the phrase teaches us that Hashem chooses the ideas which are inspired by the zimra, by the song, but even moreso, which remain in our psyche, in our soul after the inspiration and elevation of the song. It is possible for a person to experience times of spiritual high, but exactly to the extent can they disappear in a flash, with no inspiration remaining. Hence, it is incumbent upon a person to protect that spiritual elevation attained in those moments of high and using his power of serenity and the process of learning Mussar to maintain those inspirations forever.

This is exactly what we were referring to in our explanation of the Gemora's analysis of the mitzva of lighting the Chanukah menorah above. It is not sufficient to light the menorah alone, signifying times of elevation and inspiration. Rather, our service of Hashem mandates a vital aspect no less important, that is, of protecting those thoughts and experiences of spiritual highs attained with Siyata D'Shemaya, with heavenly assistance, to influence his soul forever—i.e. settle the menorah's light in the correct place. It is true that Hashem chooses the "shiyarei zimra", the remainders of the inspiration of song. Without this effort, there will be no remaining affect of these actions of inspiration. Thus, we see we

need both aspects dealt with by the Gemora, both lighting, and placing, for one without the other we have no mitzva, no menorah. Only with the inspiration of one's Divine Service as well as the efforts to maintain the influence in his heart and in his intellect will the mitzva experience affect him both spiritually and physically.

During these days—approaching the holiday of Chanukah and leading on from the period of the Days of Awe and the holidays of Succos and Simchas Torah, we must clarify to ourselves the inspirational experiences we had during Tishrei—and make them a living part of our mental and emotional life. We cannot allow those days to simply "pass us by", like a quickly-extinguished lighting of a candle—hadlaka oseh mitzva. Rather, we must endeavor to maintain the inspiration we had as permanent inner aspects of our souls, as we fulfill "placing the menorah is the mitzva". In this way, we will merit both physical and spiritual inspiration, each according to his measure of spiritual abilities and needs. Amen, may it be His will!



[Written and translated according to
understanding of writers]

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