

Darkei HaChizuk

ארבעה צריכים חיזוק (ברכות לב:) - שיתחזק אדם בהם תמיד בכל כחו (רש"י)

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465

The Yevanim's Edicts on Torah and Mitzvos

This week is Shabbos Chanukah. During Chanukah we add the "*Al HaNissim*" prayer, which explains the concept of Chanukah.

We start the prayer by saying: "**In the days of Mattisyahu, the son of Yochanan Kohen Gadol, the Chashmona'i and his sons, when the evil Roman kingdom rose up against Yisrael your nation *l'hashkicham Torasecha u'leha'aviram meichukei retzonecha, to cause them to forget Your Torah and to remove them from [fulfilling] Your statutes.***" The purpose of the Yevanim's decrees was "*l'hashkicham Torasecha*" — they did not want us to be *osek baTorah*. They also issued decrees against specific mitzvos, in order to "remove them from [fulfilling] Your statutes (*chukei retzonecha*)." They primarily were against *chukim* — not logical mitzvos, but mitzvos whose reasons are unknown to us.

And which mitzvos did the Yevanim prohibit? Which mitzvos were included in the edicts? We know that they decreed specifically against Torah learning, *bris milah*, and Shabbos observance. The Midrash relates (*Vayikra Rabbah* 32a): "Why are they taking you out to be stoned? Because I circumcised my son. Why are they taking you to be burned? Because I observed the Shabbos."

The Mitzvah of Shabbos and Its Sanctity

They specifically decreed against these mitzvos because Shabbos and *milah* are lofty, important mitzvos that raise a person to a special level and give him unique sanctity. Chazal say about Shabbos (*Yerushalmi Nedarim* 3:9) that Shabbos is equal to all other mitzvos in the Torah. Observing Shabbos sanctifies the *shomer Shabbos* person, who is sanctified on it with tremendous holiness — as it is equal to all other mitzvos in the Torah!

The truth is, the *pasuk* states (*Bereishis* 2:3), "And Hashem blessed the seventh day and He sanctified it."

Shabbos is a holy day and the actual day sanctifies us as well, since we are there, within the holiness. Indeed, on Shabbos the very air is full of sanctity.

The sanctity of Shabbos must have existed from the days of Creation, not just from when we were given the actual mitzvah of Shabbos. Shabbos was observed even before Bnei Yisrael received the mitzvah; our *Avos* kept the entire Torah and observed Shabbos. If so, the seventh day was called Shabbos and was sanctified with special holiness.

The Mitzvah of Bris Milah and Its Sanctity

Bris milah is also a special mitzvah; someone who is not circumcised is an *arel*. An uncircumcised Jew is still Jewish and is *kasher l'eidus*, fit to testify (regarding someone whose brothers died as a result of the *bris milah* — see *Hagahos Ashrei* *i Bava Kama* chap. 1, *siman* 15; *Shulchan Aruch Choshen Mishpat siman* 34), but he still has a *p'gam*, a blemish. He may not eat *terumah* and *kodshim*, and he may not perform the *avodah* in the Beis HaMikdash.

Chazal tell us (*Nedarim* 31b), "*Milah* is so great that thirteen covenants were sealed because of it." Rabbeinu Yonah writes (*Shaarei Teshuvah* 3:16) that the punishment for failing to fulfill a mitzvah is concomitant with the mitzvah's importance. That's why one who fails to fulfill the mitzvah of *milah* is punished with severe punishment of *kareis*.

The *Shaarei Teshuvah* writes that while *kareis* is usually not meted out to someone who nullifies a mitzvah through *sheiv v'al taaseh*, passively, by simply not carrying out the mitzvah, in any case, the mitzvah of *milah* is more severe, and *kareis* is incurred even in this situation. The reason? Because of the mitzvah's gravity and importance: as we mentioned, thirteen covenants were sealed because of it. As such, the converse is true too: if a person is not circumcised, it is a great *p'gam*. An *arel* cannot even eat *terumah* and is unfit for *avodah* in the Beis HaMikdash.

On the other hand, someone who is circumcised is constantly fulfilling the mitzvah of *bris milah*. Rashi on *Bava Kama* (88a, s.v. *einan*) writes that even a circumcised *katan*, a minor who is not obligated in mitzvah observance, is fulfilling the mitzvah. And even though he is not actively doing anything, he still has the *ma'alah* of fulfilling a mitzvah.

If so, if a grown-up, who is obligated in mitzvos, is circumcised, his mitzvah of *bris milah* is not a one-time mitzvah that occurred when he was a baby; it is a mitzvah that is constantly continuing. He constantly has the mitzvah of *bris milah*!

The Gemara explains (*Menachos* 43b) that when David HaMelech entered a bathhouse, he said, “Woe is to me that I’ll be standing unclothed without mitzvos in front of my Creator.” But he calmed down once he remembered about his *bris milah*. This shows that as long as a person is circumcised, the fulfillment of the mitzvah continues; the mitzvah’s sanctity accompanies him.

Shabbos and Bris Milah — Your Statutes

That’s why the Yevanim wanted to “remove them from [fulfilling] Your statutes” and nullify specifically the mitzvos of Shabbos and *milah* — since they are statutes, logic does not dictate keeping these mitzvos. The mitzvah of *bris milah* is surely not a mitzvah we would logically keep. Shabbos is a day when all *melachah* is prohibited, even *melachah* that does not involve effort, such as striking a match — this too, does not follow human logic. The Torah tells us that this is the reality — if someone performs *melachah*, even something that does not require effort, he has been *mechallel Shabbos* and ruined the sanctity of Shabbos. Why? Because that is Hashem’s will! And Hashem’s will makes it a mitzvah and sanctifies man. Through this *chok*, statute, which is *retzon Hashem*, man is sanctified. And that’s what the Yevanim wanted to nullify.

Further on in the prayer, we say “**And You, in Your great mercy, stood up for them in their time of distress.**” The commentators explain that the salvation occurred only due to Hashem’s great mercy — *middas harachamim*, not *middas hadin*. The Roman’s edicts were the consequences of a sin, as the Bach writes (*Orach Chaim siman* 670) — because they slacked off in their *avodah*. The edicts were issued due to *middas hadin*, but *rachamim* was necessary for the salvation to occur. Without *rachamim*, it would’ve been impossible because *middas hadin* obligated the passing of these

edicts. Only great mercy — not simply “mercy,” but “great mercy” — through *middas harachamim* brought about the *yeshu’ah*.

Hoda’ah and Hallel During Chanukah

“**And then Your sons entered the Holy of Holies of Your House... and they established the eight days of Chanukah l’hodos u’lehallel, to express thanks and praise, to Your great name.**” Who established this? It must have been the Beis Din HaGadol during that time who established the obligation of expresses thanks and praise on Chanukah for all future generations.

The Miracles in Those Days — At This Time

Let us address why the Chachamim established Chanukah as a time to express thanks and praise for all generations. We can understand why that specific generation — which experienced the edicts and miracles — are obligated to thank and praise, but why are we obligated? What did we receive that charged us with expressing thanks for this?

The explanation is simple. If our forefathers wouldn’t have experienced those miracles and *Rachmana litzlan* the Yevanim would have been successful in carrying out their evil plans “to make them forget Your Torah and to cause them to transgress Your will,” and the Jews of that generation wouldn’t have kept Shabbos or *bris milah*, then their future descendants wouldn’t have received a proper education. No one would have taught them to learn Torah and keep the mitzvos, because *chinuch* carries on from generation-to-generation, father to son.

If so, because of the miracle that occurred then, that allowed them once again to be *osek baTorah* and keep Shabbos — and all the other *chukim* — all future generations could continue in their path. In their merit — in the merit of the *mesirus nefesh* that led to their salvation, we too are *osek baTorah*. Since this is the case, we’ve gained in the *zechus* of their *yeshuah* and it is our *yeshuah* as well, so we too are obligated to give thanks and praise for the miracle in our days! **In the merit of the miracle our ancestors experienced in “those days,” we too “in this time” are able to be *osek baTorah* and fulfill the mitzvos.**

Giving Thanks Obligates Fulfillment

The obligation to “give thanks and praise” is because we are being *osek baTorah* and fulfilling mitzvos. Now, if we are so grateful and full of praise, this means

it's something we appreciate and value, so of course we must fulfill the Torah's mitzvos! If we don't fulfill the mitzvos, we are living in a paradox. **Why would a person give thanks and praise if he doesn't fulfill the very things he's praising?!** But if we fulfill the mitzvos and learn Torah, only then is there no contradiction.

Therefore, this obligates us to be *osek baTorah*, each person according to his strength and abilities — Torah, mitzvos and *maasim tovim*, *middos tovos*, and *ahavas chesed*. Each person is responsible to do whatever he can and whatever he knows. And if he does so, then he certainly has what to give thanks and praise for.

Chanukah Is a Time for Increasing Torah

That's why for many years already, it is known that Chanukah is not a time for *bittul Torah*, nor are the days of Chanukah a time to slack off from Torah learning. It could be that some people feel they have less of a *chiyuv* to learn during Chanukah, but this is not correct! The opposite is true — Chanukah obligates us even more to be *osek baTorah*!

For many years already, *yeshivos* don't have an off-Shabbos on Chanukah. The *bachurim* could go home on the Shabbos before or after Chanukah, but on Chanukah, they stay in yeshivah. Chanukah is *kulo Torah*, completely Torah, *l'hodos u'lehallel!* The Yevanim decreed "to cause them to forget Your Torah," and on Chanukah, there was a miracle that caused them to be able to learn Torah. That's why the obligation to learn Torah is greater.

The truth is, it doesn't obligate us only on Chanukah; it affects our entire year. Being *osek baTorah* and fulfilling the 613 mitzvos are a year-round obligation. On Chanukah, however, there is a special reason to do so, for this is when the miracle occurred, and a miracle obligates us more.

Indeed, the Shelah HaKadosh writes (at the end of *Inyanei Tefillah*), "Let me give you some *mussar* pertaining to Chanukah: one should think that the main reason of Chanukah was to give praise and thanks to *Hashem Yisbarach*, for the *Yevanim* wanted to nullify Torah and mitzvos [and they were unsuccessful]. If so, it is most fitting on these holy days to be more diligent in Torah learning than on all other days, for '*Talmud Torah k'neged kulam* — Torah learning is equal to all other mitzvos.'" The Shelah mentions that the days of Chanukah are "holy days," because they contain *kedushah* and a Heavenly *hashpa'ah* that facilitates

being *osek baTorah* and mitzvah observance. Just as we were *zocheh* to do so in the days of Mattisyahu and his sons — when the Heavenly *hashpa'ah* and *chesed* led to their victory over the Yevanim and enabled them to be *osek baTorah* and keep the mitzvos — so too, every year during Chanukah, this Heavenly *hashpa'ah* returns.

It's already been written in *sefarim* (Ramchal's *Derech Hashem* 4:7, and others) that whenever there was a *hashpa'ah* of *kedushah* in Klal Yisrael, at that same time every single year, that Divine flow returns. This is the meaning of the words we recite on Pesach: "And Hashem, give us... this day of Chag HaMatzos, '*Zman Cheiruseinu*, the time of our freedom....'" That is, Pesach is the time of our freedom, and every single year on Pesach, we go free. *Lichorah*, the freedom only happened once, during Yetzias Mitzrayim; we had been enslaved in Mitzrayim, and we went from slavery to freedom. However, "the time of our freedom" means just that. It was not a one-time occurrence; every single year at that time, we are set free.

The explanation of this is that Yetzias Mitzrayim was not only a physical freedom; we experienced spiritual freedom as well. And at the point, *Shamayim* sent down a *hashpa'ah* of spiritual freedom and Bnei Yisrael came out of the 49th level of impurity and began preparing for Kabbalas HaTorah. The *Sefer HaChinuch* explains (Mitzvah 306) that immediately after Bnei Yisrael left Mitzrayim, even before Kabbalas HaTorah, there was a tremendous aspiration and yearning for Torah. He explains that this is the concept of Sefiras HaOmer: their intense yearning and anticipation for that great day when they'd receive the Torah, prompted them to count the days, and rejoice with every passing day — which brought them closer to that longed-for day of Kabbalas HaTorah.

Just as there was such a strong desire for Torah among Klal Yisrael when they left Mitzrayim, so too, every single year at that very time, on the Yom Tov of Pesach, this *hashpa'ah* comes down again, and a person's *neshamah* is drawn to Torah with *siyatta d'Shemaya* for success in Torah. And this is freedom! Indeed, Chazal say (*Avos* 6:2): "There is no man as free as one who is *osek baTorah*, as it states: And the script was G-dly script, engraved (*charus*) on the *luchos*. Don't read it '*charus*, engraved,' read it '*cheirus*, freedom.'" Therefore, it is called "*zman cheiruseinu*, the time of our freedom."

This holds true for all the Shalosh Regalim. Shavuos is called “*Zman Matan Toraseinu*,” since there was a *hashpa’ah* of Torah at Har Sinai. As such, this *hashpa’ah* of success in Torah returns every year on Shavuos. Sukkos is called “*Zman Simchaseinu*” — at this time every year, there is a Heavenly *hashpa’ah* of joy in keeping the mitzvos.

Similarly, since there was a Heavenly *hashpa’ah* during Chanukah that enabled the Jews to be *osek baTorah* and fulfill the *mitzvos*, a *hashpa’ah* of *chizuk*

in Torah and mitzvos returns every year during Chanukah. Besides for the general obligation throughout the year to learn Torah and do mitzvos and *maasim tovim* because of “*avdus*” and our obligation to serve Hashem, the actual period of Chanukah obligates us even more!

We need *siyatta d’Shemaya* that every single one of us is truly *zocheh* to fulfill our obligations *b’sheleimus*, properly. May it be Hashem’s will that we merit this.

Chanukah – excerpted and translated from the new Hebrew *sefer* *Darkei HaChizuk — Inyanei Tzibbur*

Chanukah is a special time that is *mesugal* for success in Torah, as the Shelah HaKadosh writes. All *bnei Torah* should use this time to strengthen themselves in *hasmadah* in *esek haTorah*, and *chas v’shalom* should not waste their precious time attending events that *bnei Torah* should not be participating in. Anyone who strengthens themselves in Torah during these days is guaranteed success in Torah, and Hashem will fulfill all his heart’s desires *l’tovah*.

(From a letter, Kislev 5778)

Some people think that during Chanukah, they are exempt from learning Torah, but this is wrong! *Adaraba*, the Yevanim wanted to make us forget Torah, and a miracle occurred, enabling us to learn Torah. If so, the obligation to learn during these days is even greater. Chanukah is not a time for exemptions from learning and everyone must learn as much as possible — even more than usual. Of course, each person learns according to his abilities. Chanukah is a time of *esek haTorah*.

(From a speech at the Degel HaTorah convention, Kislev 5780)



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