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The Story of Chanukah – Eight Days and Beyond

L'hodos U'lehallel: How to Express Gratitude

On Chanukah, we stop in the middle of *Shemoneh Esrei* and *Birkas Hamazon* to tell a story that begins with the words **בימי מתתיהו** – *in the days of Mattisyahu*.

The story is certainly one that we must remember: Yavan tried to get us to forget the Torah, prompting the Chashmonaim to wage war against them. While the Yevanim were many and strong and the Chashmonaim were few and weak, Hakadosh Baruch Hu granted them a miraculous victory. The Chashmonaim then purified the Beis Hamikdash and lit the lights of the Menorah.

It's a beautiful story, but in order to tell it, we should have a *megillah* like *Megillas Esther*. The text doesn't match the format of *Shemoneh Esrei*. It would seem to have been more appropriate to simply add one line – **ועל הנס שעשית לאבותינו בימי מתתיהו** – into the *brachah* of *Modim* where we already thank Hashem for so many things. Why does the story appear in the middle of *tefillah* and *Birkas Hamazon*?

We can understand Chazal's intention if we realize that you cannot truly thank a benefactor by merely noting briefly what he did for you. A few short words aren't enough to enable a person to really connect to the event and to arouse emotions of gratitude. Only when we retell the entire story from beginning to end, including all the details as we do in the Haggadah on Pesach, beginning with the negative and ending with the positive, can we truly and sincerely express our thanks.

If our goal was simply to *remember* the miracle, that could be accomplished by adding a few words. But **if we truly wish to express**

heartfelt gratitude, we need to invest ourselves in a process that will awaken the necessary emotions.

By adding *Biymei Mattisyahu* into davening and *bentching*, the Chachamim were instructing us to inscribe every part of that story onto our minds and hearts. These written words aren't meant to merely remind us of historical facts. They are supposed to affect us and awaken the emotions that every Jew needs to feel: *l'hodos u'lehallel*, to thank and to praise.

The Mesirus Nefesh of the Chashmonaim

Even though we don't spend hours telling the story, if we pay attention when reciting *Biymei Mattisyahu*, we will certainly be moved. **It is an epic story of Am Yisrael's spiritual helplessness in the face of a powerful enemy**, culminating in a miracle we could never have imagined.

Yavan's goal was to prevent Am Yisrael from lighting the Menorah in a state of *taharah* in an attempt to sever their connection to Hakadosh Baruch Hu. We should envision simple Jews, Yankel or Moshe, forbidden to serve Hashem. They saw no way to overcome their oppressors. Nonetheless, the Chashmonaim declared, "We are going to be *moser nefesh* to serve Hashem. We will do what we must, even though we don't know what our efforts will achieve."

Their *mesirus nefesh* resulted in the great spiritual *yeshuah* they experienced.

Finding and Igniting – The Miracle of the Oil

The most wondrous aspect of the story is that the *yeshuah* yielded something totally unrelated to their *hishtadlus*. It is clear that the miracle of the many in the hands of the few, and the strong in the hands of the weak, was a result of their going to war with *mesirus nefesh* against all odds. But the discovery of the flask of pure oil, and its supernatural ability to last for eight days, appears to have no connection to their *hishtadlus*.

Some say that two unrelated miracles took place on Chanukah: the miracle of the oil, and the miraculous military victory. Therefore, they

explain that when we light the menorah, we focus on the miracle of the oil, and when we say *Al Hanissim* and *Biymeit Mattisyahu*, we focus on the miracle of winning the war. **This approach is totally mistaken. If one separates the two miracles, he hasn't really celebrated Chanukah.** In fact, he should ask a *rav* if he fulfilled his obligation, because he obviously didn't understand what he was saying when he recited *Biymeit Mattisyahu*.

In *Biymeit Mattisyahu* we tell the following story: Klal Yisrael was lost. Until then they had a Menorah that illuminated the world and served as an *eidus* - a testimony that the *Shechinah* dwelled among them. Now, they had lost that light as a result of their *aveiros*. The attack of Yavan didn't come out of nowhere. Am Yisrael was committing one wrongdoing after another, strengthening the *klipah* of Yavan with each transgression. When the *klipah* of Yavan gained sufficient strength, the *avodah* in the Beis Hamikdash ceased and the Yevanim were able to prevent us from lighting the Menorah. This was a terrible *Churban*. Despite being in the middle of the *Bayis Sheini* period, it looked like everything would be lost.

A handful of Jews decided to change direction and serve Hashem with *mesirus nefesh* - literally risking their lives. Their absolute selflessness was rewarded by the discovery of the flask of pure oil. The Beis Hamikdash was purified and the *avodah* resumed. Why? Because we have a foundational principle: **When Jews draw close to Hashem, they are worthy of receiving spiritual *yeshuos*.**

Until the Flame Rises on Its Own

If a person takes some time to think about the fact that Hashem wants us to remember Him, he can arouse very powerful emotions. His *aveiros* may have caused him to lose the *taam* of *Shabbos*, the *taam* within *tefillah*, or the *taam* of anything associated with *kedushah*. He remembers that there was once a time when he was enthusiastic about *avodas Hashem*, but alas, that is no longer the case; his life revolves around what goes on in "the street," and his feelings for Yiddishkeit have dried up. The moment this person turns and begins to take steps in the other

direction, his feelings begin to reawaken. The Menorah once again illuminates his world!

Chanukah teaches us a fundamental principle: **We do not need to search for a specific key that will unlock our heart and free our emotions.** We do not need to figure out how the process works. Our task is simply to serve Hashem with *mesirus nefesh*. That alone will activate all aspects of our spiritual world.

When Chazal said מצוה גוררת מצוה, one mitzvah brings another mitzvah, they didn't say the second mitzvah would resemble the first. There isn't a one-to-one correlation, or a particular order. **A person may begin with a *chesed*-based mitzvah, which then leads him to the mitzvah of learning Torah.** It is one of the dynamics Hashem set up in this world: As long as a person does mitzvos to bring *nachas ruach* to his Creator, he will experience a metamorphosis. Why? Because his Menorah has been lit.

National and Individual

When Klal Yisrael as a whole experienced the miracle of Chanukah, those eight days were imbued with great spiritual potential. Chazal wanted to ensure that we don't miss those opportunities, so they established Chanukah, the last Yom Tov instituted by Chazal. They placed the story within the *Amidah* that we say three times a day. It reminds us that **Jews who found themselves in the lowest spiritual state, but who took steps to return and draw close to Hashem, were saved in ways that weren't even connected to their *hishtadlus*.**

Each individual Jew also has his own personal Beis Hamikdash. We find references to this in the poem "*Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh*," composed by the author of the *Sefer Hachareidim*, and in the writings of early commentators such as the *Akeidas Yitzchak (Parshas Tzav)*, who writes that every Jew has an internal *mizbei'ach* upon which he is meant to bring *korbanos*. בימים ההם בזמן הזה – the story of Chanukah takes place in every Jew's Beis Hamikdash!

Don't Give Up!

Throughout life we face many spiritual *nisyonos* without always finding a way to successfully overcome them. Someone in that situation

will often respond to people's helpful suggestions by saying, "I have already heard all the *eitzos* and tried them. They don't work. Maybe they worked for other people, but not for me. Do you have something new to suggest?"

This is really painful because the truth is that the only *eitzos* are *tefillah*, *emunah*, and appropriate *hishtadlus*. So what is a Yid to do when he claims he tried all of them and nothing helped?

The solution can be found in *Biymeiv Mattisyahu*. **Where did we get the notion that the *hishtadlus* that can help a person overcome their *nisayon* is limited to the particular area of their *nisayon*?** Certainly, there are basics that every Jew must do. However, the miracle one needs in order to succeed is entirely up to the Ribono Shel Olam. It should be obvious that even if you follow everyone's recommendations, you can't make that miracle happen no matter what you do. That being the case, why decide that you must focus your *hishtadlus* on that particular area only?

Let's take the example of saying Tehillim. It generally has an effect on us because Dovid Hamelech wrote it with *mesirus nefesh*, and his words are therefore imbued with G-dliness, penetrating and transforming our hearts. However, if a person reads a *perek*, is it *guaranteed* to awaken his *ruchniyus*? That result is entirely in Hashem's hands.

The general rule is that nothing a person does can guarantee that his heart will awaken. We should therefore tell someone who feels he has exhausted all options: Consider the fact that **when you do something with *mesirus nefesh* for the Ribono Shel Olam, that action has the power to help you in every area of your *ruchniyus*. When that *yeshuah* occurs, you are experiencing a miracle.** You must remember that a Jew needs miracles to help him in *ruchniyus* much more than he does in *gashmiyus*. Success in *gashmiyus* may serve as a means, but it is never an end; our ultimate goal is to succeed in *ruchniyus*. And indeed, we see that a person experiences more difficulties in his *ruchniyus* and needs more *nissim* to succeed than he does in his material endeavors.

We have grown up hearing stories such as, “He became wealthy because of this act of *mesirus nefesh*,” or, “He was informed *min laShamayim* that because of his *mesirus nefesh* his wife would give birth to a child who would light up the world.” These stories illustrate the principle that a person who does something with *mesirus nefesh* in one area will be granted success in another, seemingly unrelated area.

We have no doubt that someone who is *moser nefesh* in the area of *shemiras einayim* will find that his ability to understand Torah has increased. There isn’t a direct connection between the two, but it has occurred so often that we have gotten used to the pattern. That’s why we see it as “cause and effect.” Nonetheless, this concept applies as well to areas such as *middos*. A person who has never been able to control his temper suddenly finds that he is able to resist his urge to explode in anger. He may not realize that his newfound ability resulted from his *mesirus nefesh* in an entirely different area.

In Summary

If you have tried everything and still haven’t found an *eitzah* that can help you with your *nisayon*, you must remember two things.

The first is that a person shouldn’t give up too soon, because often, only by applying an *eitzah* repeatedly will you see the benefits.

The second is that when you fight with *mesirus nefesh* to succeed in any area of your Yiddishkeit, you will find a *פך שמן טהור*, a flask of pure oil that will illuminate one aspect or another of your *avodas Hashem*.

Tell the story of Chanukah from beginning to end. It will accompany you, and those who hear the story, throughout the rest of the year.



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