

Historical Uniqueness and Daily Service

Based on a sicha by Harav Aharon Lichtenstein

Summarized by Ari Schwab

In order to better understand the nature of Chanuka, let us examine the original “*Chanuka*” – the dedication of the *Mishkan* in the desert. The *chanukat ha-Mishkan* entailed daily sacrifices as well as a public lighting of the *menora*. The *Rishonim* dispute whether this lighting was performed during the day (the Rambam) or in the early evening (most other *Rishonim*), but it was clearly an integral part of the process. The Torah seems to take for granted that Aharon performed this lighting, providing only details about how it is to be performed. Rashi, however, places Aharon at center stage, specifically his emotions at this important juncture:

Why is the *parasha* of the *menora* juxtaposed to the *parasha* of the [sacrifices of the] princes? Because when Aharon saw the dedication of the princes, he felt discouraged, as he had not participated with them in the dedication – neither he nor his tribe. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: I swear that your portion is greater than theirs, for you light and prepare the lights [of the *menora*]. (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 8:2)

The Ramban rejects Rashi’s description for a number of reasons. Among the main questions the Ramban asks is why the role of lighting the *menora* compensates for twelve days of splendor and pomp. It seems rather like God is throwing Aharon a bone! The Ramban explains that what truly consoles Aharon is the knowledge that his descendants would play the leading role in the reenactment of the *chanukat ha-bayit* during the time of the Second Temple – that is, at the time of Chanuka.

In certain respects, these two perspectives differ markedly. According to Rashi, Aharon’s lighting is the coda of *chanukat ha-Mishkan*; there is no anticipatory glance at what will transpire further on in history. Aharon takes comfort in his role in the *chanukat ha-Mishkan*. According to the Ramban, in contrast, a much broader canvas is painted. The *Mishkan* in the desert is linked to the spiritual rejuvenation during the Second Temple. The *Mishkan* was literally and politically in a desert. The first few *sedrot* of *Sefer Bamidbar* describe the splendor of the encampment; there is no struggle, no striving, no difficulty. The Second Temple stood in a period that was just the opposite – one of struggle, confrontation and difficulty – yet the latter reenacts the former. (In general, the Ramban is keen of the theme of reenactment. At the beginning of *Parashat Teruma*, he explains that the *Mishkan* is a daily reenactment of *ma’amad Har Sinai* and its immanent presence of God.)

On the other hand, there is a similarity that binds *chanukat ha-Mishkan* and *hadlakat nerot* according to both Rashi and Ramban. This is hinted at by Rashi's description of Aharon upon witnessing the dedication: "*chalsha da'ato*, he was discouraged." Two elements conjoin to discourage him. First, there is the absence of him and his tribe, making him a mere spectator. Second, the pain of being a spectator is all the greater given his credentials; he has the skills, the knowledge, and the status to be out there on the playing field! If you go to a concert, you probably do not feel envious of the musician on the stage. But if you yourself are a musician, then a tinge of envy arises.

The Ramban notes a third element of Aharon's anguish – it was not only the fact that he was not engaged in the activity that bothered Aharon, but the scope of what transpired. The sheer number of offerings created an impressive "grand opening." The more one appreciates and internalizes this, the greater the anguish of being in the dugout. The consolation of *hadlakat ha-menora* does not address this element. The Ramban therefore moves to the *chanukat ha-Chashmona'im* and the endless *hadlakat neivot* that resulted from it. It is precisely in the focus on the quantitative that we find the concern for Aharon's anguish and the common denominator between both *chanukot*.

Rashi views the "consolation" of Aharon differently. Separating, as the Torah does, between *hadlakat ha-nerot* and the broader *chanukat ha-Mishkan* highlights in qualitative terms what the *nerot* lack in quantitative terms. Early in *Parashat Naso*, there is a grand march: sacrifice after sacrifice. Some are innovative; they exemplify a step forward, a change in the social and religious landscape. And Aharon is left with the daily task of cleaning out a lamp? This is compensation? If we want something to palliate Aharon's concern, it has to have the meaning and the significance, the character and the place, of the verses that precede it. According to Rashi, Aharon is being told that despite the quantity of what came before, your role is most meaningful. Precisely because it is a single act, it is more meaningful in terms of what it symbolizes.

The qualitative superiority of Aharon's role in *hadlakat ha-nerot* is expressed in the location in which it is performed. With the exception of the incense, all of the sacrifices of the *chanukat ha-Mishkan* were offered in what would later be termed the *azara*, the courtyard. This is the equivalent of the public square of the *Mikdash*, the functional area. The *azara* is this place of presentation, not the *sanctum sanctorum*. This is where the *chanukat ha-mizbei'ach* took place – in an area with relatively free and easy access to all. Aharon, however, functions in the *heichal* – the "*kodesh*" to the east of the *kodesh ha-kodashim*. Little is done in the *heichal*. The only daily *korban* offered there is the incense, which is brought on an altar of one square cubit; only occasionally are other *korbanot* offered there (as on Yom Kippur and in the case of a *par he'elem davar*). But more than any other area, this is the locus of God's presence in *Mikdash*. It serves (according to the verses and against the Rambam) to fulfill the goal of the *Mikdash*: "*ve-shakhanti be-tokham*, and I shall

dwell in their midst.” It is there that Aharon enters and there he encounters the *Shekhina*. Aharon’s task in *hadlakat ha-nerot* is admittedly limited, but its location indicates its importance.

This qualitative element, as opposed to the quantitative plenitude of *chanukat ha-Mishkan*, is relevant to Chanuka as well. On Chanuka, we focus on quantity. In *Al Ha-Nissim*, when we focus on the victory of the Chashmona’im, we emphasize the victory of the few over the many. Similarly, when we focus on the miracle of the oil, part of the drama relates to how little oil they had. The oddity of searching the entire Temple for a small jug stems from the fact that they had none; so little oil had to do so much.

But at the same time, our celebration of Chanuka focuses mainly on quality. The entire problem of the oil was that they needed pure oil. What is purity if not first and foremost the qualitative element given to an object or person? This is what *tuma ve-tahara* is all about – the quality, nature, and character of an item! This is particularly so inasmuch as the presumed problem with defiled oil is entirely spiritual. You can’t see it, taste it, or feel it; it cannot be distinguished from the undefiled oil that lies beside it. Chanuka thus emphasizes a small quantity whose distinctiveness is almost intangible. To the extent that *tuma ve-tahara* are qualitative, they are all the more spiritually significant, as opposed to quantifiable measures.

On Chanuka, we stress the concept of *tuma ve-tahara* on the national plane; we speak of “the impure who were defeated by the pure” and we describe the victorious conclusion of “they purified the sanctuary.” Normally, *tuma* is a halakhic status that tells you what happened to an object – it was pure and it is now impure. The halakhic definition is clear, although the reality is less so. With regard to the Temple, however, there is a difference. Obviously, the laws of *tuma ve-tahara* pertain to *kodshim*. But there is also a type of *tuma* that does not translate into those terms. The Torah says that it is forbidden to enter the Temple while in a state of impurity. Interestingly, these verses do not focus on the sin per se, but rather on the effect upon the Temple: “He has defiled the Temple of God” (*Bamidbar* 19:20). Walls do not contract normal *tuma*. In this context, the *tuma*, aside from being a purely spiritual state, lacks even halakhic status.

We confronted this type of *tuma* on Chanuka in a dual sense; we needed pure oil and the Temple needed to be purified. In this respect, the focus on Chanuka is qualitative, and is thus similar to the lighting of Aharon. The message to Aharon is that while you may be lower quantitatively, think qualitatively; your lot is greater than theirs, transcending their splendor. The routine *hadlakat nerot* beats the *chanukat ha-Mishkan*.

The dream of the Hellenistic world, founded by Alexander the Great, was uniformity. In order to establish a world order, everyone needed to speak the same language; multiculturalism, difference, and uniqueness were eliminated.

But uniqueness is what we are all about. “You are one, and Your name is one, and who is like Your nation Israel, one nation in the land.” God’s love, His passion for us, as it were, is not based on quantitative data, but on quality, on our singularity. As we learn in the end of *Parashat Vaetchanan*, God did not choose us because of our great number; uniqueness and singularity define *Klal Yisrael*. Of course, uniqueness is not all that is important. One can, after all, be a unique murderer. *Klal Yisrael* must be singular and unique in service of God, love of God, fear of God and in our attempt to implant divine kingship in the world.

In this respect, the Chanuka of Rashi, with the *hadlaka* as coda, joins forces with the Chanuka of the Ramban, of the Second Temple, the one we celebrate now. Both sharpen the sense of our qualitative uniqueness, challenge, and duty – the spirituality that *tahara* represents and *tuma* abhors. In this respect, the *parasha* that the Ramban connects to Chanuka joins with Rashi’s lighting to emphasize what is special about both events – the significance not only of what we do, but how and why we do it. We learn of the significance of purity of intention, perfection of performance, and integrity of mind and spirit. This message has many other expressions in our world and in *Tanakh*, but on Chanuka, the focus is sharper. The message of quality is pure and distilled. Consequently, it is not only a historical event to be reenacted or victory to be celebrated, but the occasion for *tahara*, for *kedusha*, to raise the level, the performance and expectations of how we understand *avodat Hashem*: *tahara be-kedusha* and *kadosh be-tahara*.

We should internalize the point so that it speaks to us every day. There is one historical Chanuka for the Ramban; there are the daily *mitzvot* of Rashi. To experience *avodat Hashem* is to hear two voices. One is historical, the unique events of our past. The other is daily performance, seemingly minor *mitzvot* that, when properly performed, bring us closer to God and that much closer to ourselves.

(This sicha was delivered on Chanuka 5769 [2008].)