

*Zechariah the Prophet, Chanukah, and the State of Israel*

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

And the angel who spoke with me returned, and he awakened me as a man who wakes up from his sleep. And he said to me, “What do you see?” And I said, “I saw, and behold [there was] a candelabrum all of gold, with its oil-bowl on top of it, and its seven lamps thereon; seven tubes each to the lamps that were on top of it. And [there were] two olive trees near it; one on the right of the bowl, and one on its left.” So I answered and spoke to the angel who talked with me, saying, “What are these, my lord?” And the angel who spoke with me answered, and he said to me, “Do you not know what these are?” And I said, “No, my lord.” And he answered and spoke to me, saying, “This is the word of the L-rd to Zerubbabel, saying: ‘Not by military force and not by physical strength, but by My spirit,’ says the L-rd of Hosts.” (*Sefer Zechariah* 4:1-6, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

This passage from *Sefer Zechariah* is perhaps the most famous section of the prophet’s work and message. It contains a number of themes that are preeminently suited for Shabbat Chanukah – hence its choice by *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) as this week’s haftorah. Given its singular import, let us try to comprehend its meaning:

1. Zechariah, as befitted his noble stature as a prophet of the Almighty, had an ongoing encounter with an angel of Hashem.
2. Although the text states: “and he awakened me,” Zechariah had not actually been asleep when he beheld this vision. This is born out by the words “as a man who wakes up from his sleep,” indicating that he was like someone who had been sleeping and then awoke. As the great exegete, Rabbi David Kimchi (Radak, 1160-1235) explained: “... he [the angel] caused me to awake and I awakened myself as if I was a man awakening from his sleep.”
3. The *menorat hazahav* (golden candelabrum) is the most direct link between this haftorah and Shabbat Chanukah. It specifically refers to the (then) soon to be

rebuilt second *Beit Hamikdash* (Holy Temple), and serves as a harbinger of the future and permanent third *Beit Hamikdash*.

4. As suggested by Rabbi David Altschuler (18<sup>th</sup> century), in his well-known commentary *Metzudat David*, Zechariah was baffled by the symbolism of the two olive trees. Initially, the angel of Hashem asked him to try to interpret them – believing full well that he had the ability to do so. Zechariah, however, demurred and declared to the angel: “No, my lord.” As the *Metzudat David* notes, this means, “I am unable to comprehend the meaning of this sign.”
5. What, however, was the symbolism of the two olive trees? Rabbeinu Avraham Ibn Ezra (1092-1167) opines that olive oil spontaneously and miraculously flowed directly from the two trees into the menorah’s receptacles. It is at this point that Zechariah is told: “This is the word of the L-rd to Zerubbabel, saying: ‘Not by military force and not by physical strength, but by My spirit,’ says the L-rd of Hosts.” Suddenly, the prophet understood the olive trees’ symbolism: Zerubbabel, with permission from the newly crowned Persian King Cyrus (538 BCE), was poised to lead the first group of Jews back to Israel from Babylonia. Zerubbabel needed to understand that none of this had to do with political maneuverings and manipulations. He needed to know, as well, that this event was not the result of military power or a manifestation of physical strength. Instead, it was Hashem’s spirit (i.e. will) and guiding light alone that would finally end the Babylonian Captivity, return the Jewish people to their rightful homeland, and bring about the construction of the second *Beit Hamikdash*. Thus, the miracle of Jewish resettlement in the Promised Land would flow directly from Hashem’s beneficence, just like the olive oil miraculously flowed from the two olive trees into the menorah’s receptacles.

Many of us are highly focused upon the daily ins and outs of any news pertaining to the Middle East, in general, and to our precious Land of Israel, in particular. It is precisely this single-minded emphasis upon the politics of the Middle East that can potentially lead us astray and falsely convince us that the modern State of Israel’s “military force and ...

physical strength” is the ultimate and deciding factor in all things political and military. Thus, the message that Zechariah was tasked to deliver to Zerubbabel is as relevant today as it was some 2500 years ago. We must ever be mindful that it was solely through G-d’s will that the modern State of Israel was born from the ashes of the Holocaust. It is, as well, the fundamental reason for Israel’s existence until our own historical moment.

My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993, known as “the Rav” by his students and followers) emphasized the nearly supernatural process of Israel becoming a nation in his classic essay entitled, *Kol Dodi Dofek* (Yom Ha’atzmaut, 1956, translated as *Fate and Destiny: From the Holocaust to the State of Israel*). Therein he asserted that the *Realpolitik* of 1948 did not logically or rationally support the creation of a modern State of Israel:

First the knock of the Beloved [i.e. G-d] was heard in the political arena. No one can deny that from the standpoint of international relations, *the establishment of the State of Israel, in a political sense, was an almost supernatural occurrence*. Both Russia and the Western countries jointly supported the idea of the establishment of the State. This was perhaps the only proposal where East and West were united. I am inclined to believe that the United Nations organization was created specifically for this purpose – in order to carry out the mission which divine providence had set for it. ... I do not know whom the journalists, with their eyes of flesh and blood, saw sitting in the chairman’s seat during that fateful session when the General Assembly decided in favor of the establishment of the State. However, someone who at that time observed matters well with his spiritual eye could have sensed the presence of the true chairman who presided over the discussion – i. e., the Beloved! It was He who knocked with His gavel on the podium. If it had been John Doe who called the session of the United Nations to order, the State of Israel would never have come into being – but if the Beloved knocked on the chairman’s podium, then the miracle occurred. It is the voice of my Beloved that knocketh! (Page 26, brackets my own)

As suggested above, hyperfocus upon the politics of the Middle East can mislead us into believing that the modern State of Israel’s “military force and ... physical strength” is the underlying factor in determining its future. This is exactly why Zechariah was commanded to deliver his message to Zerubbabel, and precisely why the Rav has so

strongly underlined G-d's presence at the moment of the political founding of the State of Israel and throughout its subsequent, miraculous continuation. It is also one of the most important messages of Chanukah: We must never forget that Hashem is the one and only *Shomer Yisrael* (the Guardian and Protector of our nation). It is His spirit and guiding light alone that will finally end our bitter *galut* (dispersion), return the Jewish people to our rightful homeland, and bring about the construction of the third *Beit Hamikdash* – all under the divinely ordained leadership of the one true *Mashiach* (Messiah). May this time come soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom and  
*Chanukah Sameach!*

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[http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat\\_hashavuah/index.html](http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat_hashavuah/index.html).

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via email: [rdbe718@gmail.com](mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com).