

Parashat Miketz – Shabbat Hanukkah 5783, 2022:

What's in a Name?

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon HaKohane, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechezkel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Gittel Malka bat Moshe, Alexander Leib ben Benyamin Yosef, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

When we focus on our Sages' presentation of Purim and Hanukkah, we discover the former has an entire tractate of the *Talmud Bavli* that discusses its *halachot*, whereas Hanukkah and its laws are found in a few pages in *Masechet Shabbat*. Consequently, the following paragraph takes on particular import:

What is Hanukkah (*mai Hanukkah*), and why are lights kindled on Hanukkah? The Gemara answers: [The Sages taught in Megillat Ta'anit:] On the twenty-fifth of Kislev, the days of Hanukkah are eight. One may not eulogize on them, and one may not fast on them. [What is the reason?] When the Greeks entered the Sanctuary, they defiled all the oils that were in the Sanctuary by touching them. And when the Hasmonean monarchy overcame them and emerged victorious over them, they searched and found only one cruse of oil that was placed with the seal of the High Priest, undisturbed by the Greeks. And there was sufficient oil there [to light the *Menorah*] for only one day. A miracle occurred and they lit [the *Menorah*] from it eight days. The next year the Sages instituted those days and made them holidays with recitation of Hallel and special thanksgiving in prayer and blessings. (*Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 21b*, translation, *The Koren-William Davidson Talmud*, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz *zatzal*, editor)

In his *Commentary on the Talmud*, Rashi (1040-1105) suggests the interrogative phrase, “*mai Hanukkah*,” should be interpreted as “based upon which miracle was Hanukkah established?” rather than “what is Hanukkah?” in the literal sense of the words. (*Shabbat 21b*) In so doing, he helps us understand the reason this passage in *Masechet Shabbat* comprises the functional equivalent of a mini-Hanukkah *Haggadah*, since without it, we would be unable to determine the primary miracle of Hanukkah.

Having identified the key miracle of Hanukkah, the next logical question to ask is “why is it named, ‘Hanukkah,’ rather than something like, ‘*Nase Pach Shemen* (the Miracle of the Cruse of Oil)?” After all, if it is really about, the “one cruse of oil that was placed with the seal of the High Priest, undisturbed by the Greeks... [and the] miracle occurred [... so that] they lit [the *Menorah*] from it eight days,” then *Nase Pach Shemen* seems to be a more appropriate name.

Fortunately, there are classic sources that answer just this question. In his *Chidushei Aggadot* on *Masechet Shabbat* 21b, Rav Shmuel Eidels (Maharsha, 1555 – 1631), basing himself on *Mishna Middot* 1:6, maintains that Hanukkah received this name because the Maccabees had hidden away the stones from the *Mizbeach* (Altar) that the Syrian-Greeks had desecrated through their idol worship. As such, they needed to construct an entirely new *Mizbeach* and reconsecrate it, a process known as *chanukat haMizbeach*. The etymological relationship between the terms *chanukat haMizbeach* and Hanukkah is clear and, for the Maharsha, constitutes the basis for the name Hanukkah.

In his work, *Machzor Vitry*, Rashi’s student, Rav Simcha ben Shmuel of Vitry, France (d. 1105) offers two responses: “The name Hanukkah [in the original Hebrew] may be read as ‘*chanu kaf hay b’Kislev*—they [the Maccabees] ceased fighting on the 25th of Kislev.” His second answer, focuses, as well, on the Hebrew letters in Hanukkah and posits that, “*chane b’ kaf hay Kislev*— [the Maccabees obtained grace from the Almighty] on the 25th of Kislev.” Therefore, according to Rav Simcha ben Shmuel, this *chag* is named Hanukkah since its very letters portray major historical and spiritual aspects of the festival.

The second answer of the *Machzor Vitry*, “*chane b’ kaf hay Kislev*,” is reminiscent of an idea attributed to the Vilna Gaon (Rav Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman, 1720-1797) in which he notes that there is a *remez* (hint) to Hanukkah in the Torah itself: If someone counts from the first word of the Torah until the 25th word of the Torah, they will find that the 25th word is none other than, “*ohr*—light,” a hint to the light that we are blessed with on Hanukkah, on the 25th of Kislev. Moreover, building upon this thought, I believe we can discover a strong proof for the connection between light (*ohr*) and grace (*chane*) in the second verse of *Birkat Kohanim*: “May Hashem make His presence enlighten you and grant you grace.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 6:25, translation, Rav Aryeh Kaplan) With the Almighty’s help, may this *bracha* be realized this Hanukkah, and every day of the year, for the entire Jewish people. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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