

Shabbat Chanukah 5782, 2021:

Nerot Chanukkah: Enlightening Our Souls

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) begins *Hilchot Chanukkah* with a historical precis of its story:

In [the era of] the Second Temple, the Greek kingdom issued decrees against the Jewish people, [attempting to] nullify their faith and refusing to allow them to observe the Torah and its commandments. They extended their hands against their property and their daughters; they entered the Sanctuary, wrought havoc within, and made the sacraments impure. The Jews suffered great difficulties from them, for they oppressed them greatly until the G-d of our ancestors had mercy upon them, delivered them from their hand, and saved them. The sons of the Hasmoneans, the High Priests, overcame [them], slew them, and saved the Jews from their hand. They appointed a king from the priests, and sovereignty returned to Israel for more than 200 years, until the destruction of the Second Temple. (3:1, this and all *Mishneh Torah* translations, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

This type of introduction is highly unusual in the Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*, since we find nothing of the kind when it comes to *Hilchot Pesach* and *Hilchot Purim*, two *chagim* with the same kind of complex narratives as Chanukkah. In his posthumous work, *Days of Deliverance: Essays on Purim and Chanukkah*, my rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as "the Rav" by his students and followers, analyzes why the Rambam singles out Chanukkah for this unique treatment:

Those [Pesach and Purim] are biblical narratives. Hanukkah, however, is a post-biblical holiday. When its events occurred, the canon was closed, and prophecy was a thing of the past. The story of Chanukkah was told by the *Torah she-be'al peh*, the Oral Torah. Hence, Maimonides found it necessary to repeat the tale in his Code, which is a summary of the Oral Law. (Eli D. Clark, Joel B. Wolowelsky and Reuven Ziegler editors, page 168, brackets my own)

Why was it necessary for the Rambam “to repeat the tale in his Code?” The Rav’s answer is clear: “Knowledge of the events is indispensable halakhically for the perfect fulfillment of the *mitzvot* of Chanukkah.” This is the case, since the Rambam stresses that the act of *hadlakat nerot Chanukkah* (lighting the candles of Chanukkah) is based upon the concept of *hallel ve-hoda’ah*, praise and thanksgiving: “The *mitzvah* of kindling Chanukkah lights is very dear. A person should be very careful in its observance to publicize the miracle and thus increase our praise (*shevach*) of G-d and our expression of thanks (*hodayah*) for the miracles which He wrought on our behalf.” (*Hilchot Channukkah* 4:12) How is it that these ideas lead us to “the perfect fulfillment of the *mitzvot* of Chanukkah?” The Rav explains:

The technical performance, the *ma’aseh hadlakah*, consists of lighting a candle. The *kiyyum ha-mitzvah*, the genuine fulfillment, expresses itself in an expression of gratitude, which manifests itself in a physical act. If we are indeed to experience gratitude, it is necessary to know for what we are grateful, for what we extol the Almighty. Therefore, knowledge of the story is essential.

The distinction that obtains between *ma’aseh ha-mitzvah* and *kiyyum ha-mitzvah* is a constitutive element of the Brisker (Soloveitchik family) conceptual lexicon. As such, the Rav revisits and elaborates upon these terms throughout his public lectures and *shiurim*. One notable instance is found in his collection of *teshuvah drashot*, “*On Repentance*.”

But there are other precepts whose *performance* and fulfillment are not identical, for example when the *performance* of the precept is through specific action of some kind, or through a verbal utterance, but its *fulfillment* is up to the heart. The precept, is, in fact performed by means of an external act, but fulfillment is dependent on attaining a certain degree of spiritual awareness. (*On Repentance in the Thought and Oral Discourses of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, translated and edited from the Yiddish, Professor Pinchas HaKohen Peli, page 80)

Hadlakat Nerot Chanukkah is an ideal illustration of a *mitzvah* “whose *performance* and fulfillment are not identical,” since the *ma’aseh ha-mitzvah* is accomplished through the simple act of lighting the candles, whereas the *kiyyum ha-mitzvah* “is dependent on attaining a certain degree of spiritual awareness.” Moreover, as the Rambam stresses in *Hilchot Chanukkah*, manifest

feelings of *hallel ve-hoda'ah* are crucial elements that enable this spiritual awareness to engender the total fulfillment of this *mitzvah*. Hence, the Rav concludes: “If we are indeed to experience gratitude, it is necessary to know for what we are grateful, for what we extol the Almighty. Therefore, knowledge of the story is essential.”

Each weekday *Shemoneh Esrai* includes the *bracha* of *birkat binah*: “You graciously endow man with wisdom and teach insight to a frail mortal. Endow us graciously from Yourself with wisdom, insight, and discernment. Blessed are You, Hashem, gracious Giver of wisdom.” (Translation, *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur*) On this Chanukkah, may Hashem bless us with the wisdom, insight and discernment to imbue our observance of these holy days with the spiritual awareness that will empower us to fulfill *mitzvat hadlakat nerot Chanukkah* from the depths of our very being. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

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.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav zatzal](#)