



Vayeshev: Turbulent Tranquility

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

As we prepare for Shabbos and for the upcoming Yom Tov of Chanukah, allow me to share with you an idea that brings our Parsha and Yom Tov together.

The Talmud (Shabbos 21b) delves into much detail concerning the Yom Tov of Chanukah. After discussing the types of oils and wicks which may be used and the placement of the menorah, the Gemara asks a simple question: *Mai Chanukah*, what is Chanukah?

“For our Rabbis taught: On the twenty-fifth of Kislev [commence] the days of Hanukkah, which are eight on which a eulogy for the dead and fasting are forbidden. For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils therein, and when the Hasmonean dynasty prevailed against and defeated them, they made search and found only one cruse of oil which lay with the seal of the High Priest, but which contained sufficient for one day’s lighting only; yet a miracle was wrought therein and they lit [the lamp] therewith for eight days. The following year these [days] were appointed a Festival with [the recital of] Hallel and thanksgiving.”

There seems to be a glaring omission. When the Talmud describes the Yom Tov celebration of Chanukah it tells us about *Hallel* (the recitation of Hallel) and *Hodaah* (thanksgiving, *Al HaNissim* prayer) but makes no mention of kindling the Menorah? What is Chanukah without the lights? Aren’t the Chanukah candles the paradigmatic representation of Divine providence and intervention? Why does the Talmud omit any mention of the performance of this mitzvah?

To fully answer this question, we must look at the Parsha. The Torah states, “*Jacob dwelt in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan*” (Genesis 37:1). Yaakov had one simple desire, “*Bikeysh Yaakov ley’shev b’shaalva*, Yaakov wanted to dwell in peace and tranquility” (Rashi 37:2). After running from Esav, contending with Lavan and suffering tragedy in Shechem, all Yaakov wanted was to settle in the land of his fathers, serve God and watch his family grow. “God says to the righteous, is it not enough that you will have peace in the World to Come, you also want peace in this world as well?” (Rashi 37:2) We then go on to read of the disturbing dynamic between Yosef and his brothers. Jealousy and animosity ultimately turn the brothers against Yosef, who is sold into slavery, plunging Yaakov into two decades of mourning for the son he thought had been killed. Was it too much for Yaakov to ask for peace in this world and the next? Why does it have to be an either or? What was wrong with Yaakov’s desire for tranquility and quiet after what had been a tumultuous couple of decades?

Perhaps to gain insight into Rashi’s comment we must look at an episode at the end of the Parsha. Yosef found himself incarcerated together with the Pharaoh’s baker and butler. One morning the men awoke disturbed by dreams they had the night before. Yosef offered to listen and attempt to interpret their dreams.

“So the chief cupbearer related his dream to Joseph, and he said to him, ‘In my dream, behold, a vine is before me. And on the vine, are three tendrils and it seemed to be blossoming, and its buds came out; [then] its clusters ripened into grapes. And Pharaoh’s cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes and squeezed them into Pharaoh’s cup, and I placed the cup on Pharaoh’s palm’” (Genesis 40:9-11).

Yosef explained that in three days, the butler would be restored to his former position dutifully serving Pharaoh.

“Now the chief baker saw that he had interpreted well. So, he said to Joseph, ‘Me too! In my dream, behold, there were three wicker baskets on my head. And in the topmost basket were all kinds of Pharaoh’s food, the work of a baker, and the birds were eating them from the basket atop my head’” (Genesis 40:9-11).

Yosef explained that in three days the baker would be executed and the birds would pick away at his flesh.

What did Yosef see in these dreams that led him to offer these differing interpretations? Rav Elchanan Wasserman (1874-1941) explains that Yosef saw a fundamental difference between the two dreams. The butler’s dream was filled with dynamic activity, the baker’s was not. The butler saw himself serving and doing, the baker saw himself in a passive position. Where there is movement, there is life. Where there is passivity there is death.

Perhaps, this insight sheds light on Yaakov’s request. What is the meaning of “*Bikeysh Yaakov ley’shev b’shaalva*, Yaakov wanted to dwell in peace and tranquility”? Yaakov felt he had done what was asked of him. Unlike his father and grandfather, all his offspring would perpetuate the code of Abrahamic values. He had established a spiritually complete family. His beloved Rachel was gone, and he had had his share of struggles and life battles, now Yaakov wanted to rest. But God says, “this world is not for resting, this world is not for tranquility. Life is only meaningful if it is filled with perpetual growth and it is the struggle which serves as the catalyst for this growth. It is our challenges that force us to be more and do more. It is the hurdles of life that allow us to find our inner strength and resolve. It is only through challenge and struggle that we fully self-actualize. After



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120, when we reach Olam HaBa, the World to Come; there we will experience true peace, tranquility and rest from our struggles.”

This is the message of Chanukah as well. The Maharal of Prague (Ner Mitzvah Chapter 2) explains that the main miracle of Chanukah was the military victory. *Masarta Gibroim B'Yad Chalashim*, You placed the strong in the hands of the weak. This is the true essence of Chanukah. In fact, the entire purpose of the miracle of the *pach shemen* (the cruse of oil that burned for 8 days) was to highlight the supernatural nature of the military victory. When people saw the hand of God in the continuous burning oil, they realized the hand of God in their victory over the Greeks. The real miracle of Chanukah was that we were willing to fight, we were willing to revolt against the status quo, we were willing to struggle. It would have been much easier for our ancestors to lay down their weapons, join the Greeks and find life “tranquility.” But the *Chashmonaim* understood that when you stop struggling, you die. Our holy grandparents understood that a life of tranquility is not a life of meaning. They found the courage to rise up and keep moving.

The Gemara makes no mention of the kindling of the Menorah in our observance of Chanukah because it is not the cornerstone of our holiday. The light of the Menorah is but a tool to illuminate the true message of this Yom Tov. There is only success in struggle. Salvation only comes through battle. Tranquility doesn't engender growth or any form for upward mobility. The thrust of this Yom Tov is *Hallel* and *Hodaah*, praise and thanksgiving. Praise for God who guides our destiny and delivers us from all harm and thanksgiving for our ancestors who had the courage to continue the struggle.

Yosef foresaw the salvation of the butler in dynamic activity, the Maccabim saw salvation only through dynamic activity and we must find our personal salvation through dynamic activity and constant growth.

We look forward to the weekend, we plan our vacations and we aspire to retire. But, our job is to work, our mission is to struggle, our mandate is to grow. We must always look for ways to expand our soul and become more. We must learn to embrace the hard work of life and relish the opportunities to shape our circumstances. Although we may yearn for tranquility, deep down we know that true fulfillment and happiness can only be found through perpetual growth. We must understand that the challenges of life are but opportunities for growth, development and self-actualization. As we look into the luminescent glow of the Chanukah candles may they inspire us to embrace the struggle and pray for victory.