

Toras Imecha Chanukah Booklet

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Chanukah Thoughts from 2019-2021

Letter of Introduction

Dear friend,

Happy Chanukah! Chanukah is a holiday celebrated in each Jewish home, family by family, **נר איש וביתו**. The Greeks attacked the holiness and purity of the Jewish home. Their edicts were intended to destroy Jewish family life and uproot the mesorah which is passed down from parent to child. The fact that we are celebrating Chanukah this week is a victory, not just of the Jewish nation, but a victory of the Jewish family.

I am constantly inspired by the dedication of Jewish mothers building homes and raising children within the framework of Torah and mitzvos. Times have changed, but the challenges remain. The Greek edict requiring the removal of each family's front door is eerily reminiscent of today's erosion of privacy within our homes. The Greeks wanted our infants fed from ox-horn bottles inscribed with a renunciation of faith, and today as well even our youngest children are bombarded with messages antithetical to Torah.

The valor and faith of the Chashmonaim who held fast to our tradition is replicated by individuals and families who do the same today. We have a mesorah of standing firm in the face of tremendous societal pressure. Chanukah is the time Jewish women stood up for Hashem and his Torah, and we continue to do so.

Raising children and building homes isn't easy. We swim against a powerful and threatening current. Our job requires tremendous dedication, energy, wisdom, creativity, resourcefulness, humility, and courage. We do it with love and devotion because we know that by building our homes and raising our children, we are building Klal Yisrael for eternity.

I hope that this collection of Chanukah Torahs Imecha thoughts brings you inspiration. I pray that this learning be a zchus for a refuah shleimah for Rena Esther bas Yaffa Gita, Gila bas Esther, and Naomi bas Sarah, along with all cholim. May Hashem bless all of us with strength and success, and may we merit to see the Menorah in the third Ba'is HaMikdash illuminate the whole world.

Warmly,

Rebecca Masinter

Mikeitz - We Need Help!

We say in Al HaNisim that Chanukah's victory is over those who tried להשיחם תורתך ולהעבירם מחקי רצונך, the Greeks who tried to make us forget Hashem's Torah and remove us from his chukim. Have you wondered what the Greeks specifically found unbearable about our relationship to Torah and to the specific class of mitzvos called chukim, those laws that we don't logically understand? Another question lies in the end of Al HaNisim where we learn that these days of Chanuk are להלל ולהודות to express gratitude and praise. Why is Chanukah specifically marked for gratitude and praise?

These questions can be answered if we understand the Greek worldview. Greek philosophy put the human mind at the peak of creation. They believed that everything worth knowing could be understood with logic and reason. The Greek culture produced philosophers like Aristotle and mathematicians like Pythagoras. They were the world's great thinkers and believed that only what could be proven and understood was true. The human mind is the absolute greatest force in the Greek worldview.

They believed this to such an extent that instead of seeing their gods as greater than humans, they created gods who were frailer. Greek myths are full of stories of gods being jealous, angry, immoral, and frail. Nothing in their world, not even gods, were greater than a reasoning human being. This explains why they denied the existence of a Higher Intelligence, or Hashem. They believed that anything true could be reasoned and proved, so "chukim", mitzvos that we accept without understanding, went entirely against their beliefs. Our Torah is infinite Divine wisdom and we accept that we are limited in our understanding of it. That concept is anathema to a Greek mind.

Parshas Mikeitz which falls during Chanukah, emphasizes this lesson too. Over and over in his life, Yosef acknowledged Hashem as the source of Power. He didn't attribute any of his personal success to himself. With Yosef, it was always שם שמים שגור בפיו. Human success and wisdom was attributed to Hashem.

Why is Chanukah the time of l'hodos ulhallel? Only someone who sees themselves as limited and lacking can feel gratitude to another being. All gratitude is an admission that we have a weakness and are lacking in some way. Everyone wants to be self-sufficient; it's hard to admit we need others. But once we admit that we are dependent on others, then we can come to a level of hoda'ah, thankfulness to them. That is why the root of הודאה, gratitude, is the same as ודוי, admission. Every expression of gratitude is simultaneously an admission of personal inadequacy. The holiday when we prevailed over the Greek worldview of self-sufficiency, both by acknowledging our intellectual limitations through Chukim and our physical dependence as we were the weak and few, is the holiday for thanks and praise.

Parenting is complex and a huge challenge. It is good for all of us to remember that we aren't supposed to have all the answers. We're not Greeks. Hashem created us נפשות רבות וחסרון, with deficiencies and areas of weakness, so that we would rely on help from others. Parenting isn't something that many intuitively understand anymore - it's good to acknowledge that we need help. We read books, take classes, and learn from parents we admire. We keep acknowledging our limits and receiving help so we can be full of gratitude and praise to Hashem and His messengers who are all around us, helping us parent day by day.

Mikeitz and Imagination

In Parshas Mikeitz Yosef advised Pharaoh that seven years of plenty were coming that would be quickly followed by seven years of famine. Pharaoh then appointed Yosef to stockpile grain during the years of plenty to feed the country during the famine. The Torah says:

וַיִּצְבֹּר יוֹסֵף גֶּרָן כְּחֹל הַיָּם הַהֵם הַרְבֵּה מְאֹד עַד כִּי־חָדַל לִסְפֹּר כִּי־אֵין מִסְפָּר:

Yosef gathered grain like the sand of the sea, in huge measure, until they ceased to count, for it was without number.

Rav Hirsch tells us that כִּי־אֵין מִסְפָּר does not mean they literally couldn't express the grain in terms of numbers. Once a society has a base ten number system, they can construct a number of any size: 100, 1000, 10,000, 100,000, 1 million and so on. Certainly, Mitzrayim could count the grain. What the Torah is telling us is that the number was so enormous that it was beyond the power of human imagination. A person's imagination can't distinguish between three-trillion fifty million and three-trillion one-hundred million. We can count those numbers but we can't comprehend them - the numbers are beyond our ability to understand. When the Torah says Yosef collected grain without number, it means people stopped saying "this is the number of bushels over here" because the number was already so huge that adding to it made no impression - it was already beyond the limits of human imagination.

Interestingly, Chanukah is also a time when imagination superseded the numbers. The few, and vastly outnumbered Chashmonaim didn't start counting and calculating the number of their warriors versus the number of Greek soldiers. They didn't analyze how much ammunition either side had. The numbers didn't matter. They were able to use imagination or faith to go beyond the computations.

One of the important aspects of motherhood, is also transcending reality with imagination. It is our role to see beyond where our children are today and imagine where they can be and where they eventually will be. When a child is stuck in a phase, whether it is a young child dealing with biting, bedwetting, or tantrums, or an older child, going through the angst of adolescence or the challenges of coping with advanced academics, they need a mother who can imagine them beyond that stage. They may feel stuck in their present reality because that is all they know, but we know that these difficulties are simply part of the process of growing up. We use our imagination to see past the current state and through the other side of the stage. This is a tremendous gift to our children. Through the power of a parent's imagination, children can also gain a glimpse of it. They can perceive that they will get through their challenges. They will see past today to know that what they now struggle with doesn't define them. Who they are today is not who they will be tomorrow.

The powers of our imagination are immense. Whether or not we can imagine a thousand, a million, or a billion, we can certainly imagine our children beyond the point they are at today, and by reflecting that image to them, we allow them to imagine that too.

Rosh Chodesh and Chanukah

Chanukah is unique from all other holidays as it is the only one that encompasses Rosh Chodesh. (Although Rosh Hashana falls on the first of Tishrei, we don't celebrate it as Rosh Chodesh.) Rosh Chodesh, Chanukah, and women are all interconnected on this holiday. Rosh Chodesh celebrations for men are limited to additions in bentching and davening, but for women it is a Yom Tov to the extent that many women refrain from certain melachos on Rosh Chodesh. What is the connection between women, Chanukah, and Rosh Chodesh?

Rosh Chodesh was given as a holiday to women as a reward for not participating in the Eigel HaZahav, the Golden Calf. Why is Rosh Chodesh a fitting reward for that? Before the Eigel HaZahav, the bechor, the firstborn in each family was like a Kohein – a priest dedicated to serving Hashem. Afterwards, the holiness that had previously been among every Jewish family was set aside and limited to kohanim from Shevet Levi. Similarly, many say that before the Cheit HaEigel there wasn't going to be a Mishkan. Instead, Hashem's presence would have been amongst all the Jewish people. After the sin however, the kedusha became localized in one place, the Mishkan.

If you think about what life before the sin looked like, kedusha was regular and normal. Every family had a kohein and every house hosted the Shechinah. Afterwards, there was more explicit, visible kedusha in one Shevet and in one location, but that narrowing of holiness was a result of the Eigel, it wasn't the way it was ideally meant to be. Rosh Chodesh reflects the pre-Eigel atmosphere in that it is a regular day, people go to work and school, and yet it is still a Yom Tov. Rosh Chodesh isn't like Pesach or Shavuot, a Yom Tov of explicit holiness with no melacha, and special seudos. It's not visibly a holy day, and yet it is. In every listing of Yamim Tovim in the Torah, Rosh Chodesh and its karbanos are included - it's a day of kedusha. This is why Rosh Chodesh was given to women who didn't participate in the Eigel HaZahav. Rosh Chodesh reminds us of the intrinsic holiness everywhere and every day, as it used to be before the Golden Calf.

Why did women refrain from the sin of the golden calf and merit Rosh Chodesh? The relationship of a Jewish woman to religion and spirituality is precisely that of holiness among the routine. We don't have the explicit, visible kedusha of davening in a shul, with a minyan, with tallis and tefillin. Women's relationship to Judaism is that spirituality is pervasive in everything we do all day long. The holiness within every Jewish family and every Jewish home is due to the women's role in building it.

Chanukah has similar qualities to Rosh Chodesh. It isn't a Yom Tov. We work, go to school, and do melacha. We have no obligation for a seudah on Chanukah and yet it is a holiday. Not just a holiday, but a holiday that is specifically celebrated in our homes. *וביתו נר איש* is the mitzvah of Chanukah - for each family to light a menorah. Yes, the miracle was originally done with the menorah in the Bais HaMikdash, but today it is celebrated with a menorah in each Jewish home. Chanukah, Rosh Chodesh, and women are all tied together through this message - everything we do can be holy, each of our homes can be a Mikdash, and each of our families can be like kohanim, dedicated to serving Hashem, not despite our ordinary lives, but specifically through our normal routines.

Based on a shiur from Rabbi Moshe Hauer of the Orthodox Union.

Vayigash - Hashem's Plan

Parshas Vayigash is the climax of the story of Yosef which has been ongoing for the last three weeks. Finally, Yosef reveals himself to his brothers. . אָנֹכִי יוֹסֵף הַעֲוֹד אָבִי חַי . "I am Yosef; is my father still alive?"

Yosef's brothers are shocked and very concerned about the potential for Yosef's justifiable anger towards them. Yet Yosef, over and over, reassures them: וְעַתָּה לֹא-אַתֶּם שְׁלַחְתֶּם אֹתִי הֵנָּה כִּי הֶאֱלָקִים. "You didn't send me here, Hashem did it. Hashem had a plan and He arranged it so that I would come down to Egypt first and be able to help you when you arrived later". Hashem had a plan and nothing anyone did could change that. The brothers thought they were changing history back in Vayeishev when they sold Yosef and they said, "וְנִרְאֶה מִה-יִהְיֶה חֲלֻמֹתָיו" "We'll see what will become of his dreams", but they couldn't stop those dreams being fulfilled, because no one can stop Hashem's plan.

This is also a central message of Chanukah. The Greeks tried to prevent us from learning Torah and living within a spiritual and religious framework, but Hashem's eternal plan is that the Torah will not be forgotten from the Jewish nation. כִּי לֹא תִשְׁכַּח מִפִּי יִרְעֹן, so the Greek effort failed. Nothing can prevent the fulfillment of Hashem's plan.

If we, as mothers, understand and internalize this message, we can be relieved of so much pressure. We try our hardest to parent well and make wise decisions for our children, but we need to internalize the knowledge that this is the extent of our responsibility. We will be able to relax because we'll deeply know that Hashem's plan for ourselves and our children will ultimately be the only thing that counts. I have a friend who went to consult a Gadol about her child. She had tried many different therapies, doctors and approaches, and still didn't see how he would grow up into a healthy adult. The Gadol said to her, "You do your research and pick the path or provider that you think is best and then stop. It's not Doctor X or Treatment Y that is going to help your son, it's Hashem. Do normal hishtadlus and then accept that whether this method will work or not isn't on you. It's Hashem's plan and you can relax. Maybe your son will grow up healthy and maybe he won't, but it's not because of you." We can all look at aspects of our parenting and wonder what would have been if we had done things differently, but that isn't the path of Emunah that Yosef HaTzadik so clearly lays out for us in Parshas Vayigash. רבות מחשבות בלב איש ועצת ה' היא תקום . *Many are the thoughts in the heart of man, but only the counsel of Hashem will prevail.*

I heard a beautiful thought from Mrs. Gitti Horowitz of Bais Yaakov Middle School of Baltimore. She shared that the halacha is that if someone lights the Chanukah menorah and his lights blow out right away, he doesn't have to relight it. The message is that our job is to try and do it right the first time, but whether the light stays burning or not isn't our responsibility. This powerful lesson is especially applicable in chinuch, the root of Chanukah. We do our best to ignite the flames of our children's souls, and yet how those flames grow and burn is out of our hands.

When we make decisions for our children we can remember that the responsibility is on us to try to make the effort, but the outcome comes from Hashem.

Miracles All Around

There is a famous question asked by the Bais Yosef five hundred years ago. If we light Chanukah lights to remember the miracle that happened in the Bais HaMikdash when the oil that should have lasted one day lasted for eight days, then why don't we celebrate seven days of Chanukah? The first day wasn't a miracle - the oil burned because they had enough oil for that day. It's only the subsequent seven days that were supernatural, so shouldn't we celebrate the miracle for seven days? There are hundreds of answers to this question. The following is from Rav Simcha Zissel Ziv of Kelm.

Hashem didn't just create this world and walk away from it, but rather, as we say every day, המחדש בטובו בכל יום תמיד; *Hashem, in His kindness, renews the works of creation every day*, always. The natural world may look normal and predictable, but is nothing less than a constant miracle. The Ramban in Parshas Bo teaches us that the whole purpose of supernatural miracles is to remind us of Hashem's mastery over nature - not only that He can change nature but that He Himself creates it. Miracles are there to wake us up to the awareness of Hashem's involvement in the world at all times. Miracles aren't exceptions to the natural world; they are a reminder that even the natural world is a miracle. Therefore, the seven days of Chanukah when the oil burned miraculously are there to remind us that even the first day was a miracle.

When we live with miracles every day we call it nature, because we are accustomed to them. We lose our sense of wonder and astonishment. However, those who have the privilege of having children in our lives, get to more easily tap into the miracles that surround us every day. Young children don't find the world boring. They are amazed and entranced with everything! The first snowfall, a deer on the lawn, the Chanukah candles flickering - it's all miraculous. We get to look in their eyes, hear the wonder in their voices, and we can tap into that and claim it as ours too. Because of course, the snow, the deer, and candles burning are all miracles, we just need the reminder. We see it in our children's growth too. The first time they roll over, speak, walk, put on Tefilin, we are overwhelmed with a sense of how miraculous they are. Over time we get accustomed to the miracles of our children and we take them somewhat for granted, but Chanukah is the antidote to that. We celebrate eight days of Chanukah to remind us that the miracle of the first day is just as supernatural as days two through eight. Everything and everyone around us that we have grown accustomed to, is a miracle nonetheless.

May we all tap into the nisim of Chanukah and those of our lives, and become filled with joy and gratitude, l'hodos ul'hallel.

Chanukah Isn't a Fairytale

Some ideas are so simply obvious that we often overlook them. One of those is about the nature of the Chanukah miracles. Chanukah was not a Disney fairytale. Although we praise Hashem for giving the many into the hands of the few and the strong into the hands of the weak, we need to remember that those few and weak didn't rub a magic lamp and wait for salvation. They fought hard and bloody battles. They were wounded and killed. Jewish families didn't sit in caves playing dreidel while idly waiting for a miracle. Many were tortured and killed for persisting in a Jewish lifestyle. Even the highlight of the Chanukah story, when the Chashmonaim were able to enter the Bais HaMikdash again and purify it, wasn't a fairytale. They worked hard on their own to clean and purify it before they could use it once more. And of course, the Menorah didn't miraculously ignite itself and stay lit. The Jews searched for and found one remaining jar of oil and chose to use it. They didn't throw up their hands when they found a jar too small for proper use, saying, "I guess it's bashert - we're not supposed to light the Menorah yet." Instead, they started doing whatever they could do, lighting the Menorah even if it would be lit just one day. At that point, Hashem took over and the lamps burned eight days until they could make new oil.

Chanukah isn't about Hashem swooping in and carrying us off on eagle wings. It's about the partnership between us and Hashem. A famous Chanukah question with hundreds of answers goes like this: If the oil burned the first day naturally and miraculously for seven days, why don't we celebrate Chanukah for seven days in celebration of the miracle? Why eight days? I heard an answer from Rabbi Yisroel Roll quoting Rav Moshe Shapira. He said that the eight days of Chanukah aren't celebrating the miracle Hashem did, they're celebrating our partnership with Hashem, our relationship wherein we both work together. We did our part for one day, He did His part for seven days. The totality of eight days is because Chanukah is about our relationship with Hashem wherein we both play a role. Torah Jews walk this exquisite tightrope; we aren't fatalists who say, "whatever will be will be, I'm helpless", and we also aren't control freaks who believe we can make things go our way if we just make it happen. Rather, we live with both the responsibility in our hands to do what we can with what we have, and at the same time we have faith that Hashem will step in and do His part. If we have one jar of oil, we light it. If we have a few men to fight, we'll engage in battle. Hashem then takes our small beginnings and makes them bigger, better, and more beautiful than we could have imagined.

Motherhood embodies this partnership between humans and Hashem. Giving birth to a child is an expression of that partnership, giving a bris mila is an extension of that partnership, and raising our children and building our homes is also an expression of that partnership. The world today is so antithetical to the homes we are trying to build, and the challenges to us raising Torah true children are so huge that some may think we should just throw up our hands in despair and give in. Others may think that since the threats loom so large, we have to batten down the hatches and micromanage every aspect of our children's lives. The true Torah approach, the Chanukah approach, is that of partnership. We have to do our best to parent. We have to be proactive and do what we can. We take each tiny jar of oil Hashem has given us and use it completely. However, even while we are doing our part we know that Hashem is partnering with us and we trust Him to take our small efforts and bring hatzlacha, bracha, and yeshuos far beyond our original effort. Chanukah reminds us of the tremendous power and gift that we have as Hashem's partners in the world. May Hashem help each one of us this Chanukah and onwards do our part as He wants us to and partner with us raising our children, building Torah homes, and doing His will.

Chanukah and Chinuch

Chanukah has the word חנוך as its root. Chinuch is often mistranslated as education, but the words למוד or שנון have more to do with education than does חנוך. In Sefer Bamidbar, following the dedication of the mizbeach, or חנוכת המזבח, the Torah introduces the mitzvah for Aharon to light the Menorah. The Ramban connects the two stories, saying that the holiday Chanukah marks the rededication of the Menorah that was originally lit by Aharon in the Mishkan. What does Chanukah have to do with the dedication of the Mizbeach and what does that have to do with chinuch?

In Parshas Lech Lecha the Torah uses the word חנוך in the context of people instead of items. וַיִּרְקֹא אֶת־חֲנִיכָיו וַיְלַבֵּי בֵיתוֹ.

Rashi there defines chinuch as the initial introduction of a person or object to its intended usage, and he links this to both the Chanukah of the Mizbeach and the chinuch of a child. The holiday of Chanukah was a rededication of the service in the Bais HaMikdash because it had been interrupted by the Greeks, but the Torah connects it back to the original dedication because the holiday didn't mark a new mission for the menorah, but rather a recommitment to its original use as started by Aharon HaKohein. Chinuch isn't a short-term concept, it goes on forever. Even when there are blips on the road, even when the Greeks interrupted the Temple service, we rededicated and got back to the original mission. The mission never changed, because it was started with chinuch, an initiation on a path that lasts forever.

The chinuch that parents give their children is also an initiation onto the path that we hope they will continue following all their lives. That is why Shlomo HaMelech warns us to be careful which path we set them on. Chinuch must be particular to each child as our goal is for them to remain dedicated to their unique mission their whole lives.

חָנֹךְ לְנֶעֱרַר עַל־פִּי דַרְכּוֹ גַם כִּי־יִזְלִיחוּ לֹא־יִסּוּר מִמִּנְהָ:

As the Malbim teaches, each person has their own talents, their own interests, and their own unique combination of personality traits and intellectual abilities. The mitzvah of chinuch is for each parent to look closely at their children, determine their strengths, and start them off on their unique path of life.

מצוה שיהיה החינוך ע"פ דרכו כי כל אדם מסוגל מטבעו לענין אחר, בין בדעות יש שמוחם חד, ויש ששכלם ישר בלתי מחודד, וצריך ללמדם כפי ההכנה שנמצא בו, ובין במעשים, יש שמוכן לאומנות מיוחדת, ולמדה מיוחדת, ויקבל אותה בקל, וזה יוכר בהנער לפי התשוקה, ולפי מה שמשתדל בעצמו באיזה דבר מיוחד, צריך לחנכו לפי דרכו.

Our parenting goal is to be mechanech, to start each of our children off on their life's journey, to fulfil their own unique mission in this world. Chinuch goes far beyond today's stages and struggles. Chinuch is understanding our children and visualizing far into their future as we help them begin their lives' journeys. Parenting with chinuch isn't simple. It requires vision, faith, clarity, and courage. However, a child who begins life with chinuch carries it with him forever. Chinuch is an unlimited investment. Fortunate is the child who receives it!