

Churchill's Chanukah

Parashat Beha'alotcha, Numbers, Chapters 7-8 | June 16, 2022

In October of 1941, Winston Churchill visited Harrow School, which he had attended as a boy. The previous 10 months had been some of the most perilous in Britain's history, when France fell and Britain stood alone. At this point, the worst was past, and the United States would enter the war in six weeks. In honor of Churchill, the students added a stanza to the traditional school song:

Not less we praise in darker days
The leader of our nation,
And Churchill's name shall win acclaim
From each new generation.
For you have power in danger's hour
Our freedom to defend, Sir!
Though long the fight we know that right
Will triumph in the end, Sir!

Churchill spoke to his fellow alumni about the war, and then he concluded by saying:

You sang here a verse of a School Song: you sang that extra verse written in my honour, which I was very greatly complimented by and which you have repeated today. But there is one word in it I want to alter—I wanted to do so last year, but I did not venture to. It is the line: "Not less we praise in darker days." I have obtained the Head Master's permission to alter darker to sterner. "Not less we praise in sterner days."

Do not let us speak of darker days: let us speak rather of sterner days. These are not dark days; these are great days—the greatest days our country has ever lived; and we must all thank God that we have been allowed, each of us according to our stations, to play a part...

What did Churchill mean? These were not dark days? Were those past months not, in the phrase of a recent movie about Churchill, "England's darkest hour"? I believe Churchill's words, rightly understood, tell us something significant about the nature of heroism, and also about the very sanctity of our souls.

One of the most interesting aspects about the traditional Jewish way of reading Hebrew Scripture is the belief that we are not only studying true stories from the past, but also that these tales embody patterns in Jewish history. The phrase in rabbinic text is "*ma'aseh avot siman l'banim*," "the actions of the fathers are a sign to the children."

A poetic expression of this idea can be found in a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow reflecting on his visit to a Jewish cemetery. Though not entirely positive about Judaism, Longfellow's poem accurately describes the union of past and future in the Jewish worldview:

For in the background figures vague
and vast
Of patriarchs and of prophets rose
sublime,
And all the great traditions of the Past
They saw reflected in the coming time.

This is exactly right, and an interesting example can be found in the biblical passage we ponder this week. Chapter seven of Numbers begins by describing the moment:

And it came to pass on the day that Moses had made the end of setting up the tabernacle...
(Numbers 7:1)

We are told of the "*nesi'im*," princes or political leaders of each tribe, now bringing offerings to dedicate, inaugurate, and sanctify the newly created altar:

And the Lord said unto Moses, They shall

*present their offering, each prince on his day,
for the dedication of the altar. (Numbers 7:11)*

The Hebrew word for dedication is “*chanukah*.” The chapter then goes on to describe in great detail how a different leader brought the same exact offering each day for this inauguration of the altar, or in Hebrew, this “*chanukat hamizbe’ach*.” Note the word “*chanukah*,” because the holiday bearing that name marks a similar inauguration that took place during the Second Temple period. When Judah the Maccabee and his Hasmonean forces conquered the Temple from the Hellenistic promoters of paganism, they proceeded to purify the sanctuary, but encountered a conundrum. What to do with the altar? A pagan altar in the Temple should be destroyed, but this altar had originally been used to worship the God of Israel when the Second Temple was first constructed. How could they keep it? But how could they not? The solution is described in the Book of Maccabees, which is not part of the Jewish biblical canon, but still serves as an important source of information.

They deliberated what to do about the altar of burnt offering, which had been profaned. And they thought it best to tear it down, lest it bring reproach upon them, for the Gentiles had defiled it.

So they tore down the altar and stored the stones in a convenient place on the Temple hill, until a prophet came to tell them what to do with them. Then they took unhewn stones, as the law directs, and built a new altar like the former one. We are further told by the Book of Maccabees that:

Early in the morning on the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month, which is the month of Kislev, in the one hundred and forty-eighth year, they rose and offered sacrifice, as the law directs, on the new altar of burnt offering which they had built. At the very season and on the very day that the Gentiles had profaned it, it was dedicated with songs and harps and lutes and cymbals.

This is a *chanukat hamizbe’ach*, another dedication of the altar. That is why, in celebration of this achieve-

ment, an eight-day holiday was established that came to be known as Chanukah.

At the moment of its original establishment, there was no kindling of candles in every Jewish home. The days were celebrated with psalms of thanksgiving, and it was, first and foremost, the *altar* that was being celebrated, the resurrection in the Temple of the worship of the Hebrew God. It is in remembrance of this achievement that we celebrate Chanukah today. And the Torah reading in synagogue for most of the holiday centers on our passage, on the recollection of the original altar dedication in the desert tabernacle, thereby linking the two altar events.

But around two centuries after the dedication of the altar by Judah the Maccabee, Jerusalem was destroyed. The question then was obvious: what would happen to Chanukah now? How could a holiday centered on the restoration of monotheism in the Temple continue after the Roman pagans had succeeded in destroying the Temple?

The rabbis focused on a miracle which had originally occurred during Judah’s cleansing of the Temple. A small flask of oil that ought to have fueled a flame for one day instead lasted for eight, allowing the *menorah*, the candelabra of the Temple, to burn so much longer than was expected—eight days in all. While we were no longer able to celebrate the altar of monotheism in the Temple for eight days, we could mark *this* miracle and reenact it for eight days through the lighting of lamps at the doors and the windows of our homes.. After the destruction of Jerusalem, Jewry chose to remember that one small supernatural occurrence, because they saw in it a powerful metaphor for the Jews themselves. If that flask could last, then so could we. If the flames of the Temple *menorah* could burn beyond expectation, then even with Jerusalem destroyed, the beacon that was Judaism could survive.

Fascinatingly, there is a source of scriptural inspiration for this evolution of commemoration, which we encounter immediately after the altar dedication in Numbers:

And the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying,

Speak unto Aaron and say unto him, When thou lightest the lamps, the seven lamps shall

give light toward the center of the menorah.

And Aaron did so; he lighted the lamps thereof so as to give light toward the center of the menorah... (Numbers 8:1-3)

All of a sudden, after the description of the dedication of the altar, the *menorah*, which we have already encountered in the Bible, is discussed again. No explanation is given here for this juxtaposition. No scriptural segue is provided. But it does, intriguingly, also embody a pattern that would later take place in Jewish history: a holiday centering on the altar now suddenly focuses on the *menorah*.

And in this focus, the sages, after the destruction of the Temple sought to communicate that the Jewish homes where the lamps were lit were the means by which the Jews would outlast their enemies; by which the small flask that was a tiny people would burn brightly and outlast all others. The lighting of the Chanukah lamps heralded the fact that through many difficult centuries of exile, the luminous nature of Jewish bravery would blaze forth.

We are now able, I think, to understand the meaning of Churchill's words; his refusal to refer to Britain's crisis as encompassing dark days. The truth is, of course, that the darkness which descended across Europe and threatened Britain was thick and terrible. Churchill was adding, however, that it was precisely in that moment that another form of brightness made itself known: the luminous nature of the courage of the human spirit.

Churchill himself described Harry Hopkins, a sickly and infirm man who did much to bring America to support Britain during this time with these words. Hopkins, Churchill said,

was a soul that flamed out of a frail and failing body. He was a crumbling lighthouse from which there shone the beams that led great fleets to harbor.

At the most challenging of moments, what can make itself manifest is the extraordinary nature of the human spirit. The Book of Proverbs tell us that, "The soul of man is the lamp of the Lord." Like a flame, a

soul—if fueled by courage—can reflect an extraordinary amount of power, defying all expectations.

Churchill's statement thus allows us to see a deeper meaning here. Even after the Temple was destroyed and a terrible exile descended upon Israel, the Jews endured because of what the light of the *menorah* embodies: that the soul of man is the candle of God. The splendid simplicity of kindling a candle can be spiritually sublime, because it represents the light within ourselves.

This is given voice in a magnificent midrashic statement on the biblical passages we are studying, noting that the lighting of the *menorah* follows, in a seeming *non sequitur*, the dedication of the Temple altar. The rabbis suggest that God here is seeking to console Aaron for the fact that his tribe, that of the Levites, was not involved in the altar's dedication. God, therefore, in describing the *menorah*, is responding to Aaron, in the rabbis' words, "*shelchah gedolah mishelabem*," "your lot in the tabernacle is greater than theirs." "*She'atab madlik...et baneiro*," "for you kindle...the lights of the candelabra." Now if we take this statement literally, as Nachmanides notes, it is a strange one. Aaron was the High Priest, it was he who stood every day astride the altar; he alone who entered the Holy of Holies on the day of atonement. Does he need to be told that his portion in the Tabernacle is greater than that of the princes who inaugurated and dedicated the altar?

The rabbis, Nachmanides suggests, are not necessarily referring to the biblical moments in the desert. They are here describing how even after the Temple was gone and the altar was no more, one aspect of its daily rituals would be remembered—for Aaron's lighting of the *menorah* would be recreated in Jewish homes throughout the centuries, thereby embodying the light of Jewish fortitude itself.

The altar and the *menorah* together comprise the heart of Chanukah. That is why on the last day of Chanukah today, after reading in synagogue of the end of the altar's dedication, we then read of Aaron kindling the lamps. Thus the biblical dedication of the altar, and then the *menorah* lighting in the Temple, can be seen as predicting the evolution of the holiday of Chanukah. Or as Longfellow put it:

And all the great traditions of the Past

They saw reflected in the coming time.

Fascinatingly, Churchill himself, in a wartime speech delivered during one of England's most desperate times, paraphrased the Book of Maccabees, quoting the words of Judah before battle. Churchill said,

Centuries ago words were written to be a call and a spur to the faithful servants of Truth and Justice: "Arm yourselves, and be ye men of valour, and be in readiness for the conflict; for it is better for us to perish in battle than to look upon the outrage of our nation and our altar.."

It is precisely during the dark times in history when we can also see the courageous radiance of the soul.

To read of the *menorah* in the Book of Numbers is to read of a ritual in the Temple that we believe will one day occur again. But it is also to ponder a power within, and to know of the luminous courage that blazed forth in dark days, serving for us as a beacon and lighting the way forward to our future.

Discussion Questions:

1. Rabbi Soloveichik describes how the events of the Chanukah story mirror events from earlier in Jewish history. What, if any, occurrences in modern Jewish history might echo the events of the biblical or Second Temple eras?
2. The two symbols of Chanukah, says Rabbi Soloveichik, are the altar and the *menorah*. What do these two objects in the Temple represent?