

“Great moments are born from great opportunity, and that’s what you have here tonight, boys. That’s what you’ve earned here tonight. One game; if we played them ten times, they might win nine. But not this game, not tonight. Tonight, we skate with them. Tonight we stay with them, and we shut them down because we can. Tonight, we are the greatest hockey team in the world. You were born to be hockey players- every one of you, and you were meant to be here tonight. This is your time. Their time is done. It’s over. I’m sick and tired of hearing about what a great hockey team the Soviets have. Screw ‘em. This is your time. Now go out there and take it!”¹

How many of you recognize this speech? On February 20, 1980, US Men’s Olympic hockey team coach, Herb Brooks, shared these words of inspiration and courage in preparation for the unthinkable. For team USA to pull off a victory against the most competitive and talented team in the world was improbable. Yet, perhaps, his words gave them the self-confidence and courage that prompted Al Michaels to ask, “Do you believe in miracles?” On that day, we witnessed a modern day miracle.

As we conclude the festival of Chanukah this evening with the final candle, I’m reminded one last time about how the brachot highlight the miracles that have occurred throughout our history. Yet, as I find myself staring at the fully lit Menorah, a truly beautiful scene to be sure, I become instantly aware of how much effort, and in particular courage, was required to help these miracles come to be.

From our earliest memories of Jewish education we have learned that the miracle of Chanukah was that the oil which was found in the temple following its destruction was enough to last for only one day. Through God’s miraculous work, the oil in fact lasted for eight days. We recall this miraculous event every year beginning on the 25th of Kislev for eight days. We remember the miracle in our prayers during the festival of Chanukah with the recitation of *Al Hanisim* in both our *Amidot* and *Birkat HaMazon*. The miracle of Hanukah was not the only miracle that we have had in our Jewish history. We celebrate the miracle of *Yitziat Mitzrayim*, the Exodus from Egypt with all of the signs and wonders on Pesach. We recall *Matan Torah*, the gift of receiving Torah at Shavuot. We even go so far as recall the miracle of the prayers of Esther for Purim. Miracles aren’t uncommon in our tradition, and at the same time, they don’t just happen. Waiting for a miracle to happen doesn’t guarantee the outcome. It took an immense amount of strength, hard work and courage to decide to leave Egypt in search of freedom, to accept God’s commandments and become a Jewish people, and to rededicate the Temple and by extension, our commitment to our Jewish tradition during the time of Hellenization.

Miracles are frequently the result of a close call, a blessing in disguise. We’ve all heard and even told stories about people who were at the wrong place at the right time risking a terrible tragedy. Perhaps even oversleeping through your alarm and avoiding a terrible accident on your daily commute to work. According to Littlewoods Law, developed at Cambridge by Professor John Edensor Littlewood, individuals can expect a miracle to happen to them at a rate of about one per month! Yet, over the course of that month, we’ve actually experienced thousands of events. This can make a miracle feel commonplace, as if they don’t exist, or that they just happen without us even realizing them. I would argue, however, that a miracle is about being able to capitalize on opportunities when they present themselves. For the USA hockey team, the miracle wasn’t simply that they won, it’s that they had the courage to step out on to that ice and play with everything they had.

¹ Coach Herb Brooks pregame speech. Team USA Men’s Hockey 1980 Winter Olympic Games.

The Talmud teaches us, that even the one who is granted the miracle is unaware of the miracle itself.” I know for me, like many of you, I am not always aware of the miracles that are happening around me nor am I seeing those leaps of faith, those acts of courage to stand up and do what I need to do as miraculous event.

Perhaps, then, the miracle of Hanukkah is not about the oil lasting for eight days. Maybe we can look deeper to see a truly special miracle that occurred. Upon my further investigation of the miracle of Chanukah I have found a new meaning for the miracle.

Rabbi Laura Geller, the Rabbi Emerita of Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills, explains that the miracle of Chanukah was about courage. Rabbi Geller writes², “the miracle wasn’t that the oil lasted an additional seven days, but rather that those ancestors lit the first wick at all, without being certain that the light would last long enough to complete the rededication of the temple.” Rabbi Geller describes a scene where people are not afraid to take that leap of faith or risk taking the chance to act without knowing the end result. Rabbi Geller tells us that it is the “miracle of human courage that empowers us to take risks for the future even in our imperfect, uncertain world. It is the courage, even in the darkest of times, to create our own light.”

Rabbi David Hartman, of blessed memory, shares a similar sentiment to that of Rabbi Geller. Rabbi Hartman writes³, “The miracle of the first day was expressed in the community’s willingness to light a small cruse of oil without reasonable assurance that their efforts would be sufficient to complete the rededication of the Temple.” Once again we are witnessing courage being a fundamental component of the miracle. Both Rabbis Geller and Hartman express the importance of courage within the miracle of Chanukah. Chanukkah becomes a story about the courage to fight for something you believe in and a willingness to keep our Judaism alive.

Chanukkah is about the miracle of finding and accessing our courage. It took courage for the Maccabees to beat the Greeks. The courage needed to practice Judaism in a time of persecution was of the utmost importance. The Jewish people were courageous when they left Egypt and prepared for the crossing of the sea. It took courage to accept the Torah at Har Sinai. Who could forget the courage of Esther fasting and praying for the survival of the Jewish people during Purim. Courage is a constant presence in our history, and at the same time, it’s hard to cultivate within ourselves. Being courageous is something I personally struggle with. How can I, how can we be more courageous in our lives, to step out on the ice and come ready to give it our all for the big game? How can I live by the words of my favorite quote from Winnie the Pooh, “You’re braver than you believe, stronger than you seem and smarter than you think.” What can each of us do in this year ahead to be more courageous?

One day a farmer working in his field heard a terrible crash and then a splash, followed by loud braying and the sounds of kicking. He ran across the field to find that his most precious donkey had strayed from the barn and fallen into the well. It was a very deep well, and there was no way for the farmer to lift the donkey out of it.

He called to his neighbors, who tried to tie a rope around the donkey to lift him up. For hours they tried, but in the end they failed. What could they do?

² <http://www.sefaria.org/sheets/21945> -Sourcesheet by Melissa Kansky, “Chanukah and Courage”

³ “Trusting in a New Beginning” by Rabbi David Hartman from *A Different Light: The Hanukkah Book of Creation* by Noam Zion

One farmer suggested that each of them bring his shovel and that they bury the donkey in the well. Burying him would be better than leaving him there and listening to his braying. So they went to work.

The first shovelful of dirt smacked the donkey on the back. The donkey cried out, “God, they are going to bury me in this well.” He shook the dirt off his back and continued kicking. Another shovelful of dirt fell, then another. Each time, the donkey shook off the dirt.

Soon the donkey realized that he could save himself by pulling his feet out of the water, which was becoming mud, and stepping up; thus he could climb out of the well. Soon all of the water had been absorbed by the dirt- the donkey was above the water level. Dirt continued to rain down on him, and he continued to shake off each shovelful.

Shovelful by shovelful, step by step, the donkey climbed out of the well that had trapped him. And then, to the surprise of the farmers, he emerged from the well and wandered off into the field.⁴

A lot of our lives are spent succumbing to the weight and stresses of the earth being shoveled upon us. The courage of this donkey is similar to the courage of the story of Chanukah. As the pressure mounts, both the donkey and the Jewish people had the courage to simply shake off the dirt that kept being thrown at us. As both, Chanukah and the year come to an end, find the courage within yourself. Find the courage to try something new, to befriend a new person, to take on a new hobby. Don't be afraid of what the outcome may or may not be. Be inspired by Coach Brooks' words that “great opportunities come from great moments.” It is each and every one of our times. Now, go out there and take it. Be courageous. You never know what your next miracle will be.

Shabbat Shalom. Chag Sameach. Shanah Tova.

⁴ “The Power of Hope” retold by Rabbi David A. Lipper in *Three Times Chai*:54 Rabbis Tell Their Favorite Stories