

Vayeshev: Kisses and Connection

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

There is excitement in the air. The beautiful and holy Yom Tov of Chanukah is here. It is on this Yom Tov of Chanukah that we remember our brave ancestors who after defeating the Syrian Greeks, rededicated the Temple, lit the spark of Jewish rejuvenation, and breathed new life into our collective soul.

There are two parts of our Chanukah celebration. We commemorate and celebrate the military victory. *“Masarta Giborim B’Yad Chalashim, You delivered the strong into the hands of the weak;”* a small army of Kohanim (priests) defeated the mighty Greek fighting machine. We celebrate the miracle of the *Pach Shemen*, the little cruse of oil which lasted for eight days. Interestingly, the military victory receives almost no attention (aside from a mention in *Shmona Esrei* and *Birkas Hamazon, Grace after Meals*). The miracle of the oil takes center stage and informs the way we celebrate this holiday. How are we to understand the emphasis on the oil? Why does the *Pach Shemen* become the dominant point of focus during these eight sacred days?

Perhaps we can answer this question and gain new insight on Chanukah from this week’s Parsha. The Parsha begins with Yosef sharing his dreams with his brothers. The dreams which represented his future ascent to spiritual and material greatness infuriate the brothers. Their anger and animosity towards Yosef grows to the point that they strip him of his clothing, throw him into a pit, and sell him to an Ishmaelite caravan. The Torah records a peculiar piece of information: *“And they sat down to eat a meal, and they lifted their eyes and saw, and behold, a caravan of Ishmaelites was coming from Gilead, and their camels were carrying spices, balm, and lotus, going to take [it] down to Egypt (Genesis 37:25).”*

Rashi comments: *Why did Scripture publicize their burden? To let you know the reward of the righteous, for it is customary for Arabs to carry only naphtha and tar, whose odor is foul, but for this one (Joseph) it was arranged [that they should be carrying] spices, so that he should not be afflicted by a foul odor.*

Rav Chaim Shmulevitz (Mirrer Rosh Yeshiva, 1902-1979) asks a simple question, *“Do you think Yosef cared about the smell of the caravan? He was just stripped of his clothing, dignity and family. Would the malodorous caravan have made things worse? Conversely, do we think the aromatic spices somehow lifted his spirits? Yosef must have felt broken and forsaken, no amount of sweet-smelling spices could repair the hurt visited upon him. If this is so, why bother with the miracle?”*

To answer this question, we must understand that there are two types of miracles. The first category is those that are necessary to remedy an immediate need. For example, when the Jewish people left Egypt and found themselves stuck between the Red Sea and the pursuing Egyptian Army, they needed an immediate salvation to escape the clutches of the Egyptian oppressor. God split the sea in order to save His nation. The miracle was necessary and needed. However, there is another category of miracles, a non-utilitarian miracle. This second type of miracle is not performed to address or remedy an immediate need, but rather to send a message. More specifically, this non-utilitarian miracle is performed by God as an expression of Divine love – it is in essence a *kiss from above*. God knows that in times of difficulty we often feel alone and forsaken. God knows that when we suffer the words of the Psalmist, *“Eli Eli Lama Azavtani, My God, My God why have you left me,”* fall from our lips. In those moments when we feel estranged and unloved, God “kisses” us. He gives a *“Neshika,”* a kiss from above. It is through this kiss that He reminds us that we are not alone. It is through this kiss that He reminds us that He is right by our side. It is through this kiss that He reminds us that although the road ahead may be dark and difficult we need not traverse it alone. This kiss is the miraculous kiss of companionship and love.

Are we to understand that because Yosef was surrounded by some sweet-smelling herbs suddenly his suffering and anxiety melted away? Could the aromatic scent take away the pain, heartbreak and humiliation he was experiencing? Of course not. But in that moment when Yosef was sitting in the

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caravan like a piece of chattel, being led away from his homeland, his family and his life, he felt alone. It is true; the sweet smell would not mend Yosef's broken heart. But it was a sign from above that God was with him in this departure from the norm. The sweet scent was to remind Yosef that he was not alone. The fragrant smell conveyed the message, *"My beloved child, I am here with you. I know you are hurt, I know you are broken but I am by your side now and forever."* The pleasing aroma was a Divine kiss (*Neshika*); a kiss of reassurance, love and companionship. Sometimes, the miracles God performs for us do not remedy the current crisis or remove the pain. They simply allow us to feel a Divine embrace, a heavenly kiss from above.

This is the essence of the *Pach Shemen* (cruse of oil) miracle. God did not need to do it. It was not "necessary." We could have easily gotten by without it. If the oil would have run out after a day – so be it. We would have managed just fine. But this is exactly what makes this miracle so special. It was a "kiss" from God to us. It was a kiss that reflected God's pride and admiration for the sacrifices we were willing to make. It was a kiss that reminded us that even when life is dark and difficult, we are never alone. It was a kiss that gave us the strength to weather the difficulties and vicissitudes of life.

Now we can understand why this miracle takes center stage on Chanukah. The *Pach Shemen* is much more than a jug of oil – it is the kiss that has held us through the centuries, it is the kiss that dispels the darkness, it is the kiss that gives us the strength to get back up when life has knocked us down. We all encounter challenges and adversity and at times we wonder why Hashem allows these things to happen. We wonder why God has forsaken us and seems not to care. Yet, when we take a step back and look at all of the "Divine kisses" we have in life, we begin to realize that although we may not understand many things – we are never alone. These kisses are the ultimate testament to the presence of Hashem in our lives and the ultimate reassurance that even when we struggle – we never struggle alone. The kiss of the *Pach Shemen* is the kiss that opens our eyes and provides the illumination to see all of the other Divine "kisses" we experience throughout life.

As we bask in the glow of the Menorah, let us remember the kisses of the past, appreciate the kisses of the present and eagerly anticipate the sweet Divine kisses in the near future.