

Good Shabbos and Chanukah Sameach, everyone.

Mazel Tov to Yael and Elliot Schwarzenberger on Koby's Bar Mitzva this Shabbos. Mazel Tov also to Koby's grandparents, Gail and Sidney Schwarzenberger and Michal and Avner Shmuel.

Thank you to the *drasha* sponsors:

- Bruce and Julie Fried, in memory of Bruce's father, Milton Fried. May his *neshama* have an *aliya*.
- Robbie and Libby Lehman, in memory of Robbie's mother, Nannette Lehman, whose *yahrtzeit* is the 30th of Kislev. May her *neshama* have an *aliya*.
- Avigdor and Beth Loeb, in memory of Avigdor's father, Reuven Loeb, whose *yahrtzeit* is the 5th of Teves. May his *neshama* have an *aliya*.
- Friends of Artie Rubenstein, in his memory, and "in honor of his special relationship with Rabbi Marwick." May his *neshama* have an *aliya*.
- Elliot and Yael Schwarzenberger, "in honor of all those who braved the elements to celebrate Koby's Bar Mitzvah." Mazel Tov again!
- Hillel and Dena Soclof, in memory of Dena's father, Aron Bernstein, Aron Yehoshua ben R. Ephraim Fishel, whose *yahrtzeit* is the 29th of Kislev. The menorah in the shul was donated in his memory 25 years ago. May his *neshama* have an *aliya*.
- Fred and Janet Sunness, in memory of Fred's father, Benjamin Sunness, whose *yahrtzeit* is the 30th of Kislev. May his *neshama* have an *aliya*.

May all the sponsors be rewarded for their support of the shul with *bracha*, *hatzlacha*, and good health!

We are now in the middle of our annual Chanuka campaign to support Rav Rimon's unique *tzedakah* organization, called La'Ofek. He created this amazing initiative to assist struggling sectors of Israeli society, including soldiers from economically depressed households, Ethiopian-Israelis, people with mental health challenges, and many others in need. They have helped over 10,000 people to date and are helping more than 1,000 individuals annually strive towards a brighter future. This is the highest form of *tzedakah* and Shomrei has been most proud to partner with Rav Rimon and La'Ofek since the beginning. Rav Rimon is a real inspiration, as a paradigm of Torah and *chesed*, and it has been a *zechus* to assist him in this important mission. He reminds us of the message of Chanuka that אין הרצון דבר העומד בפני הרצון, if you really want to help, you will find a way. I invite everyone to join in this special initiative. Checks can be made out to the Shomrei Israel Fund, earmarked for La'Ofek. Thank you!

Chanuka commemorates miracles that Hashem performed long ago, as we say ששעשה נסים לאבותינו בימים ההם...and חזקת הדין הזוהר the lessons continue to this day. What were the miracles and what are the everlasting lessons for us today?

Let us go back to the beginning. What was at the root of our battle with the Syrian Greeks?

רמב"ם הלכות מגילה וחנוכה פרק ג הלכה אבבית שני כשמלכו יון גזרו גזרות על ישראל ובטלו דתם ולא הניחו אותם לעסוק בתורה ובמצוות, ופשטו ידם בממונם ובבנותיהם ונכנסו להיכל ופרצו בו פרצות וטמאו הטהרות, וצר להם לישראל מאד מפניהם ולחצום לחץ גדול. The **Rambam** writes that the Greeks enacted a series of severe decrees, specifically designed to uproot our religion; disallowing Torah study and the performance of *mitzvos*, attacking our resources and our families, defiling our Temple and exerting tremendous pressure on our ancestors to make it very difficult to keep their faith. Bowing to the pressures and allure of the culture around them, huge numbers of Jews left Yiddishkeit and became completely assimilated, and there was a civil war, between Hellenized Jews and traditional Jews.

Book of the Maccabees 1, an account of events written by a Jew not long after Chanuka, records that Antiochus's goal was assimilation.

41: Moreover, king Antiochus wrote to his whole kingdom, that **all should be one people**,

42: **And every one should leave his laws**: so all the heathen agreed according to the commandment of the king

45: **And forbid burnt offerings, and sacrifice, and drink offerings, in the temple; and that they should profane the sabbaths and festival days**:

46: **And pollute the sanctuary and holy people**:

47: Set up altars, and chapels of idols, and sacrifice swine's flesh, and unclean beasts:

48: That they should also leave their children uncircumcised, and make their souls abominable with all manner of uncleanness and profanation:

49: To the end they might forget the law, and change all the ordinances.

The Syrian Greeks, unlike many Haman, Amalek, and, more recently, the Nazis, *yemach sh'mam*, were not interested in the physical destruction of the Jews; they wanted to attack the soul of the Jewish people and have us join in their culture. This was Antiochus' stated objective.

The traditional Jews of that time were fighting assimilation. Chanuka represents the Jewish fight for survival while living with foreign influences. In many ways, the assimilation and acculturation we see today are reminiscent of the culture our ancestors were rejecting in the Chanuka story. We may have won the battle 2,200 years ago, but the war continues. . . We **face some of the same challenges today**.

Assimilation is the product of incorporating enticing aspects of other cultures to fill voids in our own lives. And the Greek culture--with its focus on logic, art, and beauty--was very enticing, and evidently the void was very real... How do we continue this battle with many aspects of modern-day culture, aspects that may appear to be very enticing but are antithetical to our value system?

The most productive way to fight assimilation is to enhance the depth of commitment to our own values and to make sure there are no voids inside waiting to be filled by outside influences.

This idea is hinted to in the Chanuka *sugya* in **Maseches Shabbos 22a** that teaches that the Chanuka menorah needs to be visible and, therefore, cannot be higher than 20 *amos*—about 30 feet. The *sugya* then notes that Torah goes out of its way to write that the pit into which Yosef was thrown was empty and had no water. Chazal famously write that there was no water, but there were snakes and scorpions (but the pit was 20 *amos* deep, so they did not notice).

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף כב עמוד א: גר של חנוכה שהניחה למעלה מעשרים אמה - פסולה, כסוכה וכמבוי. ואמר רב כהנא, דרש רב נתן בר מניומי משמיה דרב תנחום: מאי דכתיב +בראשית לז+ והבור רק אין בו מים. ממשמע שנאמר והבור רק איני יודע שאין בו מים? אלא מה תלמוד לומר אין בו מים - מים אין בו, אבל נחשים ועקרבים יש בו.

What is the connection between Yosef's "empty" pit filled with snakes and scorpions and the menorah's visibility? Chazal in many places connect water to Torah. They are the both life-sustaining forces; means of survival. Water nourishes us physically; the Torah nourishes us spiritually. Where there is a void—when there is no Torah—there is room for something dangerous to fill that void. In the story of Yosef, that meant snakes and scorpions. In our case, that means insidious influences that penetrate to our core. That is at the heart of the Chanukah story. Jews looking in the wrong places to fill the void in their lives.

The Greeks were attacking our value system—attacking the home and the core values of the Jewish people. **Their attack succeeded, to a large extent, because evidently many Jews felt a void. The figurative menorah, which represents Torah, was not “visible” in their lives. And when there is a void, it is natural to fill it with the enticing culture around.**

The lesson Chazal are teaching us is that the best way to fight this culture war, then and now, is to make sure our lives are filled with Jewish values and meaning...and spirit. That the menorah and all it represents, is always visible in our lives.

In the famous epic poem, the *Argonautica*, from the 3rd century BCE, the poet recounts the myth of the voyage of Jason and the Argonauts to retrieve the Golden Fleece from the mythical land of Colchis. But they faced a challenge in their quest. There was a group of women, known as the Sirens, who played irresistible music that would lure seafaring men onto dangerous waters where their ships would be destroyed and the men would drown. *Argonautica* records that Jason had been advised to take Orpheus, a musician, on his journey. When Orpheus heard the singing of the Sirens, he drew out his own lyre and played his even more beautiful music, drowning out their voices, and

saving his crew from destruction. This story illustrates that the best way to win the culture war and to avoid the enticements of secular society is to make sure that we play our own “music” well enough, that we fill our lives with the deep and joyous music of our own faith. If we leave a void for the enticing music that surrounds us, it leaves room for spiritual destruction. When I worked as a campus rabbi, it was sad to see so many Jewish students with very little connection or feeling for what it means to be a Jew; and not only among the unaffiliated, but even with many “affiliated.” So many were just going through the motions, but the “menorah” was not visible, it was not meaningful in their lives and worldview,

Knowledge is only one piece in our quest of *avodas Hashem*. There also needs to be passion. The Bach cites the **Maharam M’Rotenberg** that the *gezera* of Chanuka came about because of apathy in *avodas Hashem*:

ב"ח אורח חיים סימן תרע:והיה אומר מהר"מ ... אבל בחנוכה עיקר הגזירה היתה על שהתירשלו בעבודה ועל כן היתה הגזירה לבטל מהם העבודה כדתניא בברייתא (אוצר מדרשים [אייזנשטיין] עמ' 193 ד"ה דור) שגזר עליהן אותו הרשע לבטל התמיד ועוד אמר להם מצוה אחת יש בידם אם אתם מבטלין אותה מידם כבר הם אבודין ואיזה זה הדלקת מנורה שכתוב בה (שמות כו כ) להעלות נר תמיד כל זמן שמדליקין אותן תמיד הם עומדין כו' עמדו וטימאו כל השמנים וכשחזרו בתשובה למסור נפשם על העבודה הושיעם יי' על ידי כהנים עובדי העבודה בבית יי' ע"כ נעשה הנס גם כן בנרות תחת אשר הערו נפשם למות על קיום העבודה ולפיכך לא קבעום אלא להלל ולהודות שהיא העבודה שבלב" He writes that Antiochus intentionally desecrated the oil and the menorah, in order to greatly weaken them. He knew that if he denied the Jewish people a connection with the flame of the menorah, they would lose their way...

Rav Shlomo Wolbe in *Alei Shor*, Vol. II, cites a famous **Gemara Brachos 20a** that says in the name of Abaye that earlier generations were more deserving of miracles because they lived with more *mesiras nefesh*...

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף כ עמוד א אמר ליה רב פפא לאביי: מאי שנא ראשונים דאתרחיש להו ניסא, ומאי שנא אנן דלא מתרחיש לן ניסא? . . אמר ליה: קמאי הוו קא מסרי נפשייהו אקדושת השם, אנן לא מסרינן נפשיין אקדושת השם.

He cites his rebbi, the great Mashgiach, **Rav Yerucham Levovitz of Mir**, who explains that *mesiras nefesh* does not mean literally to give up one’s life...It means to put all of one’s focus and abilities and energy into *mitzva* observance. It is an attitude of focus and passion and single minded devotion.

אדמו"ר (הג"ר ירוחם ליבביץ בדחו"מ ח"א מאמר א' וג' ומאמר קו) זי"ע ביאר גמרא זו כמין חומר: אביי לא דיבר כאן על מסירת הנפש בשעת השמד או בשלש שבירות ששם הדין הוא שיהרג ואל יעבור, כי בזה בודאי היו מוסרים נפשם על קידוש השם...גדר זה של מסיר"נ הוא ללכת בעבודת ה' עד קצה גבול כחות הנפש שבאדם, שיהיו כחות האדם בעבודה "בפועל הגמור" וכאן הוא סוד הנסים: כאשר האדם מנצל כל הכחות שישנם לו בטבע עד הקצה בזה הוא מגיע למדריגת "למעלה מן הטבע" וזוכה לנסים. וזאת כי הנהגת "למעלה מן הטבע היא הנהגה של השי"ת כמו הנהגת הטבע, ומי שמנצל כל מה שניתן לו בטבע זוכה ללמעלה מן הטבע דהיינו נס.

Abaye did not speak here of the מסירת נפש required of us in times of threatened annihilation or of three capital offenses that one should be killed and not violate, because in this all would certainly have given up their souls for the sanctification of the name... this מסירת נפש is to walk in the way of G-d to the full limit of the powers in man, that the powers of man are fully utilized and here is the secret of miracles: when man uses all the powers and ability that he has in his nature to the extreme, he reaches the point of going beyond, and deserves Hashem to go beyond as well...

The **Sefas Emes** comments on the Gemara in Shabbos 21a that says the appropriate time to light is משתשקע החמה עד שפת אמת בראשית לחנוכה שנה תרלא (ליל ה) אא"ז מו"ר זצלה"ה פי' הרגיל בנר להביא ההארה והתחדשות אל ההרגל וכן פי' שתכלה רגל.

דכליא רגלא דתרמודאי. שהוא ג"כ להסיר ההרגל והטבע.

The Sefas Emes plays with the vowel sounds and rephrases it as משתשקע החמה עד שתכלה הרגל מן השוק. Not “*ha-regel*,” the feet of the passers-by, but “*hergel*,” meaning routine or habit. Chanuka is the festival of constant renewal and renewed commitment and excitement. The existence of a flame is dependent on a steady flow of fuel, producing the light shining in the darkness. All of this represents the need to constantly rejuvenate our spiritual lives, to fight the drudgery of routine.

How do we motivate ourselves to live with depth and passion? We must not see religion as a superficial, one dimensional, limited experience. Instead, we must appreciate the richness of *mesorah* --the traditions of our parents and grandparents—seeing ourselves as part of a continuum going back thousands of years הזה בימים ההם בזמן הזה and

strengthening our connection to the *mesorah* of our family and faith. Fortunately, Mattisyahu and his sons, and many other brave Jews, understood this. Notice the words of Mattisyahu when he declared battle:

Maccabees 1 [King James translation]

19: Then Mattathias answered and spoke with a loud voice, Though all the nations that are under the king's dominion obey him, and fall away every one from the religion of their fathers, and give consent to his commandments:

20: Yet will I and my sons and my brethren walk in the covenant of our fathers.

21: God forbid that we should forsake the law and the ordinances.

Mattisyahu understood that the struggle was not just about his generation. It was about maintaining the *mesorah*, the legacy handed down through dozens of generations by people who were *moser nefesh* to continue our rich and deep traditions. We must protect this *mesorah* by filling our homes not only with the proper practices, but also with excitement and enthusiasm for those practices.

Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks, in *The Light of Home*, writes: ...within a few years Greece began its decline and fall, yet Jews and Judaism survived; they still do. What was the difference? The Greeks focused on politics and the state. **Jews placed their faith in something smaller—the family and the home. . . When families are strong, children are strong, and they can face the future without fear. When families are weak, children grow up anxious and confused and a civilization begins its decline. The future of our world won't be decided by the Euro, the Internet, or space probes to Mars, but by how much or how little we value our children—by the flame we light at home.”**

This is highlighted by the focus on lighting candles as a family—the requirement is — *ner ish u'beiso*, maintaining this tradition as a family. Chanuka always falls out in the middle of the Yosef story in the Chumash. Yosef, by all odds, should have been totally assimilated in Egypt. He was alone in a foreign and enticing culture. But he withstood the test and stayed true to his faith. Chazal in *Medrash Tanchuma* teach that it was the image of his father that kept him strong in that time of challenge. דמות דיוקנו של אביו.

The **Kedushas Levi** notes that there is an unusual *trop* on the word *va-yema-en*, meaning “and Yosef refused.” The *trop* is called a *shalshelas*, which means “chain.” From this, the Kedushas Levi understands that Yosef maintained his faith because of his connection to the *avos*. Yosef's connection to the *shalshelas ha-mesora* kept him strong. He understood in that moment that he was entrusted with a legacy that must be protected. He understood that he had a responsibility to keep the faith alive and transmit to future generations.

פסיקתא זוטרתא בראשית לט יא ויש דורשין לעשות מלאכתו. ודאי אלא ואין איש, שלא נמצא איש שנראתה דמות דיוקנו של אביו בחלון, אמר לו יוסף עתידין אחיך להיות חקוקין על אבני השוהם, שנאמר ששה משמותם על האבן האחת (שמות כח י), רצונך שלא תמנה עמהם,

In these times of great assimilation, we must find ways to transmit the beauty and depth of our religion. We must ensure that there is no “empty pit” that can be filled with dangerous influences. We must reinforce the beauty of family and *mesorah* that is so fundamentally linked to our survival.

Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski, in *Generation to Generation* (p. 94) writes: *The gifts that I received on Chanukah have long since returned to the elements. I cannot recall a single toy I received on Chanukah. . . But I can still relive the candle lighting. I can see myself sitting on Father's lap and watching the Chanukah lights glow. The miracle of Chanukah was that a tiny bit of oil lasted for eight days. An even greater miracle is that the glow of Father's Chanukah lights have lasted for five decades*

May we strengthen our connection to the beautiful music of our *mesorah*...and turn inward for fulfillment—and let the light of our menorahs and *mesorah* brighten our lives, the lives of our children and the world...until we are *zoche* to see the day when we are returned to a rebuilt Yerushalayim and *Beis Hamikdash*, and the holy menorah will once again be lit...and light up the world...Happy Chanukah!