

The Hidden Message Of Chanukah

The Gemara in Shabbos (21B) tells us that our Sages established Chanukah to commemorate the miracle of the oil lasting 8 nights. When one analyzes the Chanukah story and its historical significance and relevance, this Gemara seems puzzling. The Ramban tells us that if not for the victory of the Chashmonaim, Torah would have been forgotten. Based on this, why would our Sages establish Chanukah for the miracle of the oil? Surely the miracle of the military victory, which enables the survival of Torah and Mitzvos, was of greater significance.

Hidden vs Open Miracle

The Maharal explains with regards to the military victory, that although it was clearly a miracle, it is possible to attribute it to nature. Granted a small untrained army defeated an army of over 40,000 men, but one could irrationally claim this to be within the realm of their military capability. However the miracle of the oil was a miracle that defied the bounds of nature and clearly showed the hand of Hashem. It was through this open miracle that one comes to realize that just as the miracle of the oil was orchestrated by Hashem, so was the military victory. Therefore, our Sages established Chanukah for the miracle of the oil, as a means to reflect upon the miracle of the military victory, and the survival of Torah.

Applying It To Ourselves

We can glean from here an insight into seeing the hand of Hashem in our lives. At times we may attribute events that clearly indicate Hashem's involvement, to natural causes. By focusing on open miracles such as those that occurred in Egypt, or during Chanukah, it can be a powerful tool to help us see Hashem's involvement in our daily lives.

The Value Of A Single Mitzvah

Another approach to answer this question, is based on the words of the Rambam. The Rambam says, "One should be careful with the Chanukah lighting to publicize the miracle, and to add appreciation for the miracles Hashem did." It sounds like the Rambam is saying that the Chanukah lighting causes an added appreciation for the other miracles Hashem did. In order to explain the words of the Rambam, we first need to understand why Hashem felt it necessary to perform a miracle in this situation.

Firstly, if the Jews would not have lit the menorah, due to a shortage of oil, that would not be a punishable violation of any commandment. As we know there is a concept, if something is out of one's control one is not culpable. Secondly, they were permitted to use the impure oil, if that was the only oil they had. Although this would not have been a fulfillment of the Mitzvah in its highest form, it would nonetheless qualify for the Mitzvah. So why would Hashem perform a miracle? It seems that Hashem performed a miracle here, so that a Mitzvah could be fulfilled in its most preferable way. Through this miracle, we can know how valuable a single Mitzvah is to Hashem, and how privileged we are to be able to perform them. Through this idea we can understand the words of the Rambam. It is through the lighting of the candles 2500 years later, which is a declaration of the great value of a single Mitzvah, that we can begin to appreciate the survival of Torah and Mitzvos. Based on this we can explain the intentions of our Sages in establishing Chanukah for the miracle of the oil. Our Sages understood that we can't celebrate the miracle of the military victory, which facilitated the survival of Torah and Mitzvos, without first appreciating the great value of a single Mitzvah.