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# Chanukah: A Celebration of Mesorah

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Inspiration for Your Students

# Chanukah: A Celebration of Mesorah

Chanukah celebrates the survival of Torah throughout the generations under adverse conditions. Just as Purim is a celebration of our physical survival, a fulfillment of the *pasuk*, “ואף גם זאת בהיותם בארץ איביהם לא מאסתיים ולא געלתיים לכלתם להפר בריתי” (Vayikra 26:45), that no matter where we are dispersed, no one will be able to destroy us, Chanukah is the fulfillment of the promise, “לא תשכח מפי זרעו” (Devarim 31:21), and the *pasuk* from Navi, “רוחי אשר עליך ודברי אשר שמתי בפיך לא ימושו מפוך ומפי זרעך” (Yeshaya 59:21). These *pesukim*, which talk about the Torah being passed down mouth to mouth, seem to refer specifically to the *Torah Sheb’al Peh*. This is the true celebration of Chanukah, and therefore Chanukah offers a unique opportunity to strengthen the concept that *Torah miSinai* is accurately transmitted from one generation to the next.

When you think about the transmission of the Torah, it’s mind boggling! Modern research has found 750,000 differences of text in the “New Testament,” a document guarded, copied, and studied for less than 2,000 years by a powerful church. Our *Torah Shebiksav* is a longer document that is 3,300 years old, and yet it endures despite attempt after attempt to destroy us.

So many efforts have been made to take the Torah away from us, to forbid our learning. Through it all, people have stood up with *mesirus nefesh*—not just to learn, but to teach the Torah. It says that “ושננתם לבניך” refers to *talmidim*. Part of *kabalas ol Malchus Shamayim* is teaching Torah. Just think of the *Asarah Harugei*

*Malchus*—Rabi Chanina ben Tradyon taught Torah publicly, even when he was told that the Romans would kill him. Think of Jews in Communist Russia, teaching their children in cellars. This *mesirus nefesh* has ensured Torah’s survival, and understanding it gives us the greatest sense of the Torah’s *chashivus*, reality, and accuracy.

In the *hakdamah* to his *Siddur*, Rav Yaakov Emden swears by his life that the survival of *Klal Yisroel* and the continuity of Torah is a greater miracle than *Yetzias Mitzrayim* and *Kriyas Yam Suf*. How can it be that every attempt to destroy the Torah has been foiled? It doesn’t make any sense! The same *Sefer Torah* has been read for 3,300 years, every *Shabbos*, Monday, and Thursday. The text has stayed exactly the same, and if anyone makes a mistake while reading, it is immediately corrected. If the slightest error is found—even just a barely-visible slit through one letter—then the *Sefer Torah* has to be put away and fixed. There is only one real discrepancy between various *minhagim* of *sifrei Torah*: in the phrase “*petzua dakah*” (*Devarim* 23:2), one version spells “*dakah*” with a *Hey*, and another with an *Alef*. This does not change the meaning or the pronunciation. The few other changes that exist are all *chaseiros* and *yeseiros*—an extra *Yud* or an extra *Vav* here and there. *Lo ye’uman ki yesupar!*

When you look at all this, it gives a certain perspective to why learning is so important. This is learning that has been passed down from generation to generation, *mipah el pah*, “לא ימושו מפיו ומפי זרעך ומפי זרע זרעך מעתה ועד עולם”. This is learning that countless people have sacrificed their lives to learn and pass on. This is learning that has been the focus of an extensive Torah observance: for generations, we have observed the same *mitzvos*, put on the same *tefillin* and the same *tzitzis*, built *sukkos*, put up *mezuzos*, given our sons a *bris milah*, eaten *matzah*...

Albert Einstein was once asked, “If you could meet a person of your choice from previous generations, who would it be?” The questioner assumed he would name one of his predecessors in science, like Galileo, Newton, or Copernicus. But Einstein, who was not a religious man, replied, “I would like to meet Moses.” He added, “I would ask him: ‘Could you have imagined that thousands of years after you were gone, the Torah you taught your people would still be alive and well, studied and practiced the same way it was in your day?’” Einstein was a brilliant individual, and that was his biggest *peleh*. It’s the greatest of miracles.

The existence of the *Torah Sheb’al Peh* is also incredible. We are studying the same *Torah Sheb’al Peh* that was passed down from Moshe Rabbeinu to Yehoshua to

the *Zekeinim* to the *Nevi'im*. We have a direct chain of *mesorah* from Moshe Rabbeinu through the Vilna Gaon and right down to the modern-day *Roshei Yeshiva*. When you think about this, there is nothing more satisfying, nothing more *chashuv*, nothing more confidence-inspiring that we have the word of Hashem.

The system of *Torah Sheb'al Peh* is itself a marvel. How can an *Amora*, who was so much less than a *Tanna*, ask questions on a *Tanna*? How can a *Tosfos*, who lived almost a thousand years after the *Amora'im*, ask a *kasha* on the *Gemara*, which was written by the *Amora'im*? It is a system of analysis, a system of truth. The *Chachmei Yisroel* who studied the *Torah Sheb'al Peh*—and the *Torah Shebiksav*, which is its basis—were constantly asking, elucidating, delving deeper and deeper, engaging in discussion and interactive learning. This is how the system survives intact.

But you can take it one step further: the system has a built-in insurance that it will not be forgotten. The Ohr Hachaim Hakadosh in *parshas Tazria* asks a question: In one place it says that Hashem taught Moshe Rabbeinu the whole Torah, and in another place it says Hashem showed Moshe Rabbeinu future *batei medrash*, and when He took him to the *bais medrash* of Rabi Akiva, he didn't understand the *shiur*. Hakadosh Baruch Hu taught Moshe Rabbeinu everything—how is it possible that he didn't understand the *shiur*? The Ohr Hachaim says (as do other *meforshim*): Hashem taught Moshe Rabbeinu all the *mishnayos* and *halachos* of *Torah Sheb'al Peh*. He also dictated all the *pesukim* to him. But one thing He didn't show him: where every *halacha* of *Torah Sheb'al Peh* is hinted in the *pesukim*. That's what Rabi Akiva was talking about, and that's why Moshe Rabbeinu didn't understand the *shiur*.

This concept is amazing: We have a *Torah Sheb'al Peh* and we pass down *halachos* from generation to generation. But if ever something is forgotten, *chalilah*, we have the ability to restore it through the *midos shehaTorah nidreshes bahen*, the method by which we learn *pesukim*. The *Gemara* says that when *Klal Yisroel* mourned the passing of Moshe Rabbeinu many *halachos* were forgotten. Osniel ben Kenaz was able to restore them “*b'pipulei*”—Rashi says this means through *kal vachomer* and *gezeiras shava*. This built-in security system plays a large role in the Torah's survival—alongside the *mesirus nefesh* of the greatest minds of every generation to learn and teach the Torah.

And there's one more thing: The fact that every *halacha* has two sources—*Torah Shebiksav* and *Torah Sheb'al Peh*—gives us the ability to have a clarity of *halacha*.

If you just see one version, you may miss something, but when you see two versions, each complementing the other, this allows the deepest and most accurate understanding of the *halacha* and the true *mesorah*.

Regarding Chanukah, the Rambam says that the primary purpose of the *neis* of the *menorah* is to help us appreciate what one *mitzvah* is, because if we can do that, then we can appreciate the survival of the whole Torah. Clearly, the *ikar* is the survival of the Torah.

In *Al Hanisim*, we don't mention the *menorah*, only the war. The Ramban says that “אלמלא החשמונאים, היה נשתכח תורה מישראל”—if not for the *Chashmonaim*, Torah would have been forgotten from *Yisroel*. Of course the Ramban doesn't mean it would have actually been forgotten, because it says, “לא תשכח מפיו זרעו”, but *al pi teva*, that's what could have been.

The main celebration of Chanukah is the survival of Torah. In this way, Chanukah provides a unique opportunity to strengthen the commitment, understanding, and appreciation of our *talmidim* and *talmidos* of the truth, accuracy, and miraculous nature of Torah. There is no such thing in all the nations of the world; there is nothing comparable to surviving like this for thousands of years. The only reason it is possible is that Torah is the word of Hashem, passed on faithfully by the most brilliant people with the deepest commitment to truth, to asking questions, and to ensuring that the next generation understands it. This is the Torah we have today. These ideas can truly be an inspiration to our *talmidim* and *talmidos*.