

Chanukah - Benefits of Mitzvos

What is חנוכה, and why are lights kindled on חנוכה?
The Sages taught: On the twenty-fifth of Kislev, the days of חנוכה are eight. One may not eulogize on them and one may not fast on them. What is the reason? When the Greeks entered the בית המקדש they defiled all the oils that were in there by touching them. And when the חשמונאים overcame them, they searched and found only one jug of oil that was placed with the seal of the כהן גדול, undisturbed by the Greeks. And there was sufficient oil there to light the מנורה for only one day. A miracle occurred and they lit the מנורה from it for eight days.

מאי חנוכה? דתנו רבנן: בכ"ה בכסליו יומי
דחנוכה תמניא אינון דלא למספד בהון ודלא
להתענות בהון. שְׁכַשְׁנָנְסוּ יוֹנִים לְהִיכֵל
טְמְאוּ כָּל הַשְּׁמֵנִים שְׁבִהִיכֵל. וְכַשְׁגְּבֵרָה מַלְכוּת
בֵּית חֲשִׁמוֹנָאִי וְנִצְחוּם, בְּדִקּוֹ וְלֹא מָצְאוּ אֶלָּא
פֶּךָ אֶחָד שֶׁל שֶׁמֶן שֶׁהָיָה מוֹנֵחַ בְּחוֹתְמוֹ שֶׁל
כֹּהֵן גָּדוֹל, וְלֹא הָיָה בּוֹ אֶלָּא לְהַדְלִיק יוֹם אֶחָד.
נַעֲשֶׂה בּוֹ נֶס וְהַדְלִיקוּ מִמֶּנּוּ שְׁמוֹנֶה יָמִים.
(שבת כא:)

Instructions For Teaching This Lesson:

Present to your class the benefits and power of מצוות.

Step 1:

Explain to the students how the celebration of the נס of the שמן captures the essence of חנוכה and teaches us the importance of each מצוה.

Step 2:

Impress upon the students that the מצוות were given for OUR benefit. Emphasize: מצוות are given to us to perfect our characters and make us into better people. Stress that emulating Hashem builds our relationship with Him. מצוות give us שכר in עולם הבא.

Step 3:

Discuss with students the meaning of עול מלכות שמים.

Step 4:

Show the video from Rabbi Yoel Gold
<https://torahanytime.com/lectures/330726>

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רמב"ן בראשית מט, י

כִּי הָיוּ חֲסִידֵי עֲלִיּוֹן, וְאֶלְמָלָא הֵם נִשְׁתַּכְּחוּ הַתּוֹרָה וְהַמִּצְוֹת מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל

“The חשמונאים were the greatest צדיקים, without whom the learning of Torah and the observance of מצוות would have been forgotten from בני ישראל.”

This begs a question. If the whole תורה would have been forgotten if not for the חשמונאים, why are we celebrating the נס of a jug of oil rather than the נס of the survival of the תורה?

רמב"ם הלכות חנוכה ד, יב

מצות נר חנוכה מצוה חביבה היא עד מאד וצריך אדם להזהר בה כדי להודיע הנס ולהוסיף בשבח הקל והודיה לו על הנסים שעשה לנו. אפילו אין לו מה יאכל אלא מן הצדקה שואל או מוכר כסותו ולוקח שמן ונרות ומדליק

“The mitzvah of lighting the menorah is such a precious one, so much so that a person must be really careful to publicize the miracle and increase praise and thanks to Hashem for the miracles that He did for us. Even if a person doesn't have food to eat, except for what he gets from charity, he should borrow or sell his shirt to buy oil and candles to light.”

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. To add to the question, we know that if one cannot perform a מצוה for a reason out of his control, he is not held responsible as is the case with the שמן. Even more so, בדיעבד, if there is no pure oil available, the כהן is permitted to use non pure oil to light the מנונה. If so, why did Hashem deem it so important to perform this מצוה? What was the great significance of the נס of the שמן? How does it capture the essence of the נס of חנוכה?

It seems that Hashem performed a miracle here, so that a מצוה could be fulfilled in its most preferable way. Through this נס, we can know how valuable a single מצוה is to Hashem, and how privileged we are to be able to perform them. Through this idea we can understand the words of the רמב"ם. It is through the lighting of the candles 2,500 years later, which is a declaration of the great value of a single מצוה, that we can begin to appreciate the survival of תורה and מצוות. Based on this we can explain the intentions of our חכמים in establishing חנוכה for the miracle of the oil. Our חכמים understood that we can't celebrate the miracle of the military victory, which facilitated the survival of תורה and מצוות, without first appreciating the great value of a single מצוה.

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Let us delve into the purpose of the מצוות:

בראשית רבה מד

רב אמר לא נתנו המצוות אלא לצרף בהן את הבריות

“Rav said: The מצוות were given only to refine people through them.”

The מצוות were only given for our benefit. They improve our characters, make us better people, give us good מדות. Hashem gave us so many מצוות to give us more שכר.

We clearly can understand that the מצוות בין אדם לחבירו, the מצוות that we are commanded to do between us and other people, help build our characters. We have the מצוות of חסד and צדקה, which improve our generosity and רחמנות. We have the מצוה of כבוד הורים ומורים of מצוה that improves our humility and respect.

What about other מצוות? The truth is that every single Mitzva is extremely beneficial and valuable to us.

Let's look at the mitzva of Kashrus; a mitzva למקום אדם, בין אדם, that you wouldn't think has anything to do with developing good מדות.

First of all we have the mitzva of שחיטה, slaughtering the animal halachically. Throughout history, governments have tried to outlaw שחיטה, stating that it's a cruel way to kill an animal. However; we know that שחיטה is actually the most humane and quickest way to kill an animal, giving it the least amount of pain. We have always known this, and we have scientific facts that acknowledge this. (See our section on שחיטה in our Parshas Toldos lesson plan) This מצוה keeps us away from cruelty and helps us develop רחמנות.

Next, we have the מצוה of איסור בשר בחלב; we are forbidden to cook an animal in it's mother's milk, which leads to the whole topic of milchigs and fleishigs. If we think about it, we will realize that the mother's milk is the life force of the baby - it's what gives the baby its nourishment. It would be cruel to take that milk and cook the baby in it to make it taste better. Again, this הלכה is distancing us from bad מדות. Actually, every time you eat kosher food, you are having an experience in building טובות מדות.

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Story from the גמרא:

A great scholar lived in ירושלים many years ago. His name was Rebbe Shimon ben Shetach. He was a צדיק and spent all his time in the study of the תורה. Rebbe Shimon had many disciples and students, but he never accepted any fees from them. He earned his meager livelihood by making ink. Early in the morning, Rebbe Shimon would go to the woods and gather a sack full of chestnuts and carry it home on his shoulders. Out of these nuts he would make ink and sell it.

Rebbe Shimon was very poor, but he had no regrets except one - that too much time was wasted on carrying the loads of nuts on his bare shoulders. How he wished he could spend this time in the company of his students and teach them more and more of the Divine wisdom of the תורה. Finally, he decided to buy a mule. He sold the belongings of his home and bought a mule.

When he brought the mule from the market, his students went out to see it. They stroked it and petted it and admired it, and then they suddenly discovered a precious stone hanging down from its neck, hidden in a little bag. The students rushed into the house. "Yishtabach Shemo!", they exclaimed. "Hashem has rewarded your piety. You are a wealthy man now! Our dear master shall know no more want!" They showed him the precious diamond which they had discovered on the mule. But Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach did not share their excitement.

"חט ושלום that I take this diamond," he said. "I only bought a mule from that Yishmaeli, and this diamond does not belong to me."

Whereupon Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach ran to the market in search of the man who had sold him the mule. He found the Yishmaeli and returned to him the precious stone. The Yishmaeli was amazed at such unheard of honesty.

"Blessed be the G-d of Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach!", he exclaimed, and never became tired of repeating it over and over again. Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach, who was involved in Torah learning and teaching all day, had become an extremely refined person, making such a Kiddush Hashem.

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Story:

Many Israelis travel to India after they complete their military service. Liora and her brother Ayal were two such tourists who took off for India. They traveled together from one tourist attraction to the next, then split up to follow separate trails. Ayal stumbled upon Arachim's Bayit HaYehudi hostel in India where he enjoyed the hospitality and listened to some fascinating Torah lectures. Drawn to the extensive library, he discovered new concepts that changed his life completely. He eventually opted for a life of Torah and mitzvos.

In contrast to Ayal, Liora wandered around India until she reached the city of Varanasi where she came across a cult headed by a charismatic guru. He spoke eloquently of the brotherhood of all mankind, the spirit of the cosmos, and all kinds of "spiritual" talk. His captivating words drew Liora in, and she immediately joined the cult.

When Ayal learned of his sister's new affiliation, he tried to talk some sense into her and get her out of her new religion. Unfortunately, her attraction to her new mentors was too strong. He begged and pleaded to no avail. As a last resort, Ayal suggested that they both return home for a visit with their parents. He suggested that Liora attend an Arachim Torah lecture together with him while they were in Israel. Liora readily agreed, fully confident that nothing could take her away from the new source of inspiration she had found in India.

They arrived at the Arachim building, and after a considerable delay, an Arachim staffer mounted the podium and announced that the lecturer was sick and unable to attend. However, in order not to leave the audience entirely empty-handed, he read to them a short summary of the Jewish laws concerning lost property, the laws of השבת אבידה. He explained that the Torah requires someone who finds a lost object to assume responsibility for it and to make a reasonable effort to find the owner and return the object. He also described how a finder must make sure that the person who claims that the object is his, is truly the owner. The person must give identifying marks or characteristics, to prove that the item really belongs to him.

Liora sat there and yawned, totally unimpressed. The lecture had practically put her to sleep. This was so technical and nothing like the spiritual enjoyment that the guru in India had spoken about. Ayal was devastated. How would he ever pry his sister away from the cult now? After the lecture, they trudged out of the hall and headed for home.

The next day, Liora flew back to her cult in India, and Ayal enrolled in a yeshivah for baalei t'shuvah in Yerushalayim.

It was only a short while later that Ayal was suddenly called out of the Beis Midrash with an urgent message that someone was outside waiting to see him. He was speechless to find his sister Liora greeting him with a wide smile.

"What are you doing here?" he asked incredulously. "I want to enroll in a school for baalos t'shuvah," she replied.

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Story (continued):

“You?” asked Ayal. “What happened? What made you change your mind about your ‘wonderful’ cult and its guru?”

Liora told him the full story: “One day, soon after I returned to India, the guru asked me to accompany him somewhere. As we were walking along the alleyways of Varanasi, the guru bent down and picked up a fat wallet that someone had obviously just dropped. He opened it and found it full of bills and documents. With a smile of satisfaction, he tucked it into his pocket.

“I was speechless. Some tourist had just lost a considerable sum of money, a driver license, and other valuable documents. His name, address, and other personal details were all there, and it would be a simple matter to find him by contacting the police or local embassy of his country. Why did the guru just take it for himself? Wasn’t that like stealing?”

“When I suggested to the guru that perhaps we should try to find the owner, he embarked on a long lecture about the unity of the universe, the brotherhood of all men and the dynamics by which the energy of the cosmos had transferred resources from the former owner of the wallet to him. He explained that the two of them were actually one soul, divided between two bodies, and the wallet had been lost so that the money would reach its rightful destination.

“I then recalled the Arachim speaker and his presentation of the Torah laws that apply in such a case. The sharp contrast between philosophy perverted by greed and loyalty to the truth brought me back to my senses. I immediately made up my mind to choose the Torah way of life and booked a ticket back home.”

Why does Hashem want us to have such good Middos? One of the reasons is so that we could emulate Hashem. When we become more like Hashem, we become דומה לשכינה. And that is something that brings a person the greatest happiness.

שבת קלג:

אבא שאול אומר: “ואנחנו” — הוּי דומה לו, מה הוא חנון ורחום — אף אתה יהיה חנון ורחום.

“Be similar, as it were, to Him, Hashem: Just as He is compassionate and merciful, so too you should be compassionate and merciful.”

Perfecting our מדות makes us more like Hashem. Being like someone creates a deeper connection to them. Having a relationship with Hashem is the purpose of our existence.

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Story of the Heart Tart:

When I turned 32, my mother came to my house and brought me a heart shaped birthday cake. She asked me, "Do you know why I specifically bought a heart?" And I realized that 32 = לב - heart in גמטרי'.

My mother passed away 15 years ago and this past year I celebrated my 32nd anniversary with my husband. I went out and bought a heart pan and baked a heart tart. As I baked that heart tart, I felt very close to my mother, since I was emulating her. And that brought me so much happiness. Similarly, when we emulate Hashem, we feel close to Him, and that's the greatest pleasure of all.

I visited a wealthy man who had a lot of workers. I looked at the workers and they were sweaty, hot, and dirty from running around and doing the hard and often senseless work their boss had them do. I felt bad for them, but they must do the work because he is their boss. Then I realized how lucky I am. My Boss loves me. My Boss gives me jobs too. Sometimes my jobs are hard, but my Boss only gives me jobs that are good for me and for my growth and benefit! Of course, my Boss is ה', and my jobs are the Mitzvos!

ערובין כב.

"היום לעשותם" — ולא למחר לעשותם, "היום לעשותם" — למחר לקבל שכרם.

"Today is the time to do them, in this world, and tomorrow, in the next world, is not the time to do them. Today is the time to do them, but only tomorrow, in עולם הבא, is the time to receive reward for doing them."

In this world, עולם הזה, is our opportunity to do מצוות. Once a person goes to the next world after 120, he cannot do מצוות anymore. This is the time where we reap the reward and enjoy the שכר for all the מצוות that we did in this world. The smallest שכר in עולם הבא is much greater than the greatest pleasure in this world.

Before the Gaon of Vilna died, he picked up his ציצית and held them close to his heart. He explained that in this world he purchased his ציצית for a few kopecks and every moment he wore them he willfully served his Master. However, in heaven no matter how much money he would spend, he would never be able to do the מצוה of ציצית. We must realize how precious the מצוות are, and grab every opportunity we have to do them in this world.

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משל:

A poor man went on a trip to find his fortune. He heard of an island that had diamonds instead of rocks scattered on the floor. The only catch was that a ship only went to and from the island once a year. He would have to be away from his family for an entire year. After much contemplation, the man and his wife agreed that he would go. He got to the island and behold, it was as said! Diamonds lined the streets! He grabbed a bunch, put them in his pocket, and went to the nearest store to buy food. When he attempted to pay with the gems, the store owner laughed at him, "Those are worthless here. If you want to buy something, you must pay in chicken fat." The man worked on the island for a year earning chicken fat. With the chicken fat, he was able to buy what he needed on that island. After a year, he returned home. When he walked through his door, his wife asked him to show her his treasures. He took out 5 lbs of chicken fat! His wife was very angry. "Chicken fat?! How worthless! What did you do?" The husband explained that on that island, it was chicken fat that had value and that was able to buy everything one needed. With all the opportunity available around him by using chicken fat on the island, he got caught up with the island and forgot what to collect for when he would return home! He was so sad that when he had the opportunity on the island to collect diamonds, he wasted that opportunity and didn't think of what he needed back at home. Now he desperately searched his belongings and found the few diamonds that he had grabbed as soon as he arrived. With those diamonds, he was able to live the rest of his life in relative peace and without much worry. Yet, he always regrettably thought, "Wow, I could have collected so many more diamonds...had I done that, boy what a reward I would be enjoying right now."

במשל:

We are like the man who went to collect diamonds. We are in this world to collect מצוות. They are the only thing that has value in עולם הבא. The chicken fat is like the money and pleasures in this world. We think that they are valuable and have the ability to bring us happiness. This; however, is a big mistake. We may enjoy them, but they pale in comparison to the real value in life. The real value is the מצוות that not only benefit us in this world, but also translate into unbelievable שכר in the next world, which will last forever and ever. We cannot get caught up in the superficial things and lose sight of what is really important like the man in the משל.

תהילים יט, יא

הנחמדים מזהב ומפז רב ומתוקים מדבש ונפת צופים.

"More desirable than gold, than much fine gold; sweeter than honey, than drippings of the comb."

As it says in תהילים, mitzvos are the most precious thing in the world!

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We have a mitzvah to say שמע every single day. When we say שמע we are supposed to have in mind that we are accepting upon ourselves עול מלכות שמים. What does this mean? This literally means the yoke of the kingship of Hashem. What is a yoke? A yoke is a wooden bar that goes over an animal's neck to attach it to a cart or plow. The yoke is very heavy. The מצוות are like a yoke because they are like a heavy burden on us that we must fulfill. However, we must realize how wonderful and precious this yoke of מצוות is.



Imagine you see two people carrying very heavy sacks. One has a sack full of coals for work, while the other is bringing home a sack of gold which he has just earned. The two sacks are equally heavy. The man with the coals is grunting under the weight of the sack and moaning about how heavy it is. In contrast, the man with the gold is enjoying the weight on his shoulders because it constantly reminds him of the vast wealth that he possesses and the enjoyment it will bring him.

We are so lucky to be carrying עול מלכות שמים that is so valuable and will bring us the ultimate happiness and good, both in this world, and certainly in the next world, in עולם הבא!



ברכות ג:

מה יונה אינה ניצולת אלא בכנפיה אף ישראל אינן ניצולין אלא במצות
 “מה יונה is likened to a dove. Just as a dove is saved from its enemies only by its wings, so too, בני ישראל is saved from their enemies only by the merit of the מצוות.”

If the dove doesn't appreciate the value of its wings, and doesn't use them to fly, those wings become a heavy burden. But if he uses them in the way they were meant to be used, he will soar to the sky! So too with בני ישראל, if we don't appreciate the value of the Mitzvos, they can feel like a burden. But if we value and cherish the Mitzvos, we will soar with them, and go higher and higher - not even the sky will limit us, and we'll be so close to Hashem! What can be greater?!

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Higher and Higher By: Yehuda!

VERSE 1:

When I was just a small boy
I heard the legend of the dove,
Like all the other animals
Hashem created him with love.
But the dove was extra special
For it was so pure and white,
Hashem sent it to the forest
To turn the darkness into light.
But all the animals were jealous
And their hatred grew so strong,
They plotted ways to rid themselves
Of the dove and his sweet songs.
First the tiger then the jackal
Then the bear and then the snake,
When they'd attack the dove would run
And the dove barely escaped.

PRE-CHORUS 1:

So the dove turned to Hashem
Tears streaming down his cheeks,
I feel that I am all alone
With no one close to me.
But then from under Hashem's throne
Where He stores His precious things,
He gave the dove a special gift
He gave the dove its wings.

CHORUS 1:

And He said
Higher and higher
Higher than the sky,
Higher and higher
That's as high as you can fly.
You'll fly up to the heavens
Even higher than you dreamed,
Higher and higher
You'll fly so close to me.

VERSE 2:

The dove went to the forest
With confidence and pride,
He'd never have to run again
He'd never have to hide.
He would always be protected
And now that he had wings,
He would sit up in a treetop
And the world would hear him sing.
But all the animals were furious
When they saw the dove's new wings,
It was (as) if Hashem was telling them
That the dove would be their king.
So they pounced upon the dove
And he could barely fly,
They left him torn and wounded
They left him there to die.

PRE-CHORUS 2:

So the dove turned to Hashem
And he cried, "It isn't fair!
These precious wings You gave to me
That I always have to wear.
They are so very heavy
Much more than I can bear,
Please take me from the forest
I cannot make it there".
And then Hashem turned to the dove
"My child, please understand,
Now I have given you your wish
Your destiny is in your hands.
If you use your wings for flying
They'll never weigh you down,
And you'll fly up so much higher
Than those who live upon the ground."

CHORUS 2:

And you'll go
Higher and higher....

VERSE 3:

The dove returned back to the forest
And now the others lay in wait,
They'd attack the dove in unison
And this time death would be his fate.
But the dove was so determined
And he began to fly,
Like Hashem had promised him
He soared up towards the sky.

CHORUS 3:

And He went
Higher and higher...

VERSE 4 (ABRIDGED):

Our story has concluded
But friends, there's one more thing,
The little dove- that's you and me
And the Torah- that's our wings.

CHORUS 4 (ABRIDGED):

You'll fly up to the heavens
Even higher than you dreamed,
Higher and higher
You'll fly, you'll fly so close to me.

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What does the גמרא say is the reason that we have חנוכה? What are we commemorating on חנוכה?

How does celebrating the ניס of the שמן also celebrate the ניס of the survival of the תורה?

What do מצוות do for us?

1. _____

2. _____

Give two examples of מצוות and the מדות that they build within us:

1. _____ - _____

2. _____ - _____

How does having good מדות bring us closer to Hashem?

How are we like the יונה?

Chanukah - Benefits of Mitzvos

What does the גמרא say is the reason that we have חנוכה? What are we commemorating on חנוכה?

the נס of the שמן - the שמן lasted 8 days

How does celebrating the נס of the שמן also celebrate the נס of the survival of the תורה?

The נס of the שמן shows us how important each and every מצוה is. Once we know that, we can fully appreciate what the value of the תורה is.

What do מצוות do for us?

1. They perfect our מדות.

2. They give us שכר.

Give two examples of מצוות and the מדות that they build within us:

1. השבת אבידה - אחדות

2. שחיטה - רחמנות

How does having good מדות bring us closer to Hashem?

We are emulating Hashem. Emulating someone makes us close to them.

How are we like the יונה?

We have a special gift, the תורה, that protects us and can make us sore and be close to Hashem like the יונה can do with its wings.