

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

MIKEITZ and CHANUKA 5782

NEVER ALONE

Yosef, all of 17 years old, is orphaned from his beloved mother, rejected by his brothers with only his father Yaakov and younger brother Binyamin to bring him comfort and solace. His brothers eventually conspire against him and he is sold into slavery. Later, he is put to the test with Potifar's wife and thrown into prison for many years.

At any point in his early life, Yosef could easily have concluded that HaShem had abandoned him, but one seemingly insignificant incident convinced him otherwise. When Yosef was in the pit, a caravan of Yishmaelim approaches on its regular route from Gilad to Egypt. Yosef is taken out from the pit and sold to the Yishmaelim. The Torah takes the trouble to inform us that on this particular run, the caravan was not carrying its usual cargo of kerosene, but rather three very pleasant-smelling spices NACHOT, TZARI and LOT. Rashi explains (37:25) that HaShem purposely created the mix-up so that the Yosef would not be distressed by the horrible smell of the fuel. How though did this occurrence give Yosef the chizuk he needed to confront whatever awaited him in Egypt?

For the answer, let's revisit a question often asked about Chanukah. How does the miracle of the oil relate to the military victory of the Maccabees? Many explain that during the war prior to the Menorah miracle, it was impossible to know whether Gd was actually involved in these events. The miracle of the oil, however, made it plain that the war was as much a miracle as was the oil. HaShem had not forsaken His People. He was in the battle as He was in the Mikdash!

Yosef's situation appeared hopeless. His present state - bleak; his future - even darker. And then, Yosef suddenly took note and perceived a "sign" - sweet-smelling spices instead of foul-smelling kerosene. This was Gd's signaling to Yosef that HaShem never left him.

In this week's Parsha, when a distraught Yaakov is compelled to allow Binyamin to accompany his brothers to Egypt, he gives them gifts for the viceroy. The gifts include the spices - NACHOT, TZARI and LOT, the very same spices that accompanied Yosef into slavery. When Yosef opens his father's gift and smells the spices, he realizes that in everything that happened to him - everything - Gd was there all along.

The oil and the spices. The message is the same. We all go through difficult periods from time to time - health

issues, rejections, failures and setbacks. No matter the doubts and insecurities, no matter how desolate and grim the present may look and feel, if we search hard enough for "that little bit of oil, those wonderful aromatic spices", we will find HaShem "speaking to us" from the most unlikely of places. That happy coincidence, that surprising gift however small, that unexpected expression of love and caring - they are all the "small miracles that Gd performs for us daily". (Modim B'racha of the Amida)

In a word, we are never alone! As the Rav once put it, the Omnipresent Almighty "can reside in the humblest and tiniest of places". And man, in moments of despair and agony, feeling abandoned and alone, suddenly realizes that "Gd is addressing him, not from infinity but from the infinitesimal, not from the vast stretches of the universe but from a single spot in the darkness which surrounds suffering man..." Man tearfully discovers that Gd is his companion and friend, and with that awareness, he finds himself empowered and inspired to go forward.

To "Take" a Person

There is a Rashi in Mikeitz that contains a pearl of wisdom about how to relate to people.

In English, the verb "to take" can

have a variety of meanings. So too, in the Hebrew. The Torah tells us (43:15) that the brothers on their second trip to Egypt take with them gifts and money for Yosef. The assumption, of course, is that they took their youngest brother as well. The Targum, however, employs two different Aramaic words to describe two very different types of taking. And Rashi elaborates. When speaking about taking objects, the standard translation of taking is understood as a physical act. However, when the Torah wishes to inform us that Binyamin was taken, it employs a different translation, UDVARO, which means, "and he was spoken to".

The idea is a powerful one. You don't simply take people; you don't treat people as some object that can be manipulated at will. If you want to bring someone along, if you want someone to follow your lead, you are obliged to take them, but with words. They are to be treated as human beings with feelings and sensitivities. You are to afford them the dignity of addressing them in convincing but polite speech. This is how to take a human being.

This important insight has many applications. In marriage, in our friendships, even in our encounters with strangers, it is human speech that dignifies our relationships and elevates any meeting into something of mutual value. Binyamin was not

some kid brother who would be willy-nilly shlepped along regardless of his feelings. Binyamin had to be spoken to, coaxed and addressed as an individual, and thus given the respect that only sensitively articulated words can accomplish. Imagine if we used speech in such a fashion. Think of the warmth we could engender, and then consider how much of the deep-seated resentments we carry around with us would quickly dissipate in the mutuality of a conversation.

The Hidden Message of Chanuka

According to Rav Soloveitchik, the actual ceremony of lighting the Chanukiya in our homes was a custom inaugurated only after the destruction of the Second Temple. In other words, had we been living during the Second Temple era, we would have observed Chanukah just with the recitation of Hallel and Al HaNisim, but with no lighting of the Chanuka lights. How are we to understand this rather unusual opinion?

During the Second Temple era, it was quite common for the Menorah miracle to occur every day when the little oil in the Ner HaMa'aravi lasted longer than physically possible (Yoma 39b). During this period, Chanuka was celebrated primarily for the military victory of the "mighty into the hands of the few".

However, after the Temple was

destroyed, these military triumphs no longer seemed relevant. Our exile and persecution appeared to foreclose on any future armed victories. How then could Chanuka be celebrated? Chazal then suddenly realized that Chanuka had another message that now needed to be "dusted off" and broadcast loud and clear.

The Talmud (Shabbat 22b) tells us that the original reason for the Menorah in the Mikdash was not for illumination. The "pillar of fire", in the desert provided all the light needed. Rather, the Menorah lights were to signify "to all mankind that the Shechina (Divine Presence) would always rest upon Israel."

After the Churban, many sects - notably Christians - were arguing that Gd had abandoned Israel. After all, how else to explain the overwhelming carnage and devastation that accompanied the Temple's destruction? Into this gloom and despair, Chazal chose to declare that no matter the apparent "hidden Face of Gd", that no matter our dispersion and suffering, HaShem would never forsake His People. And to make sure that both Jew and non-Jew "got it", our Sages added to the Chanuka observances the lighting of the Chanukiya in our homes and by our windows.

In our world, where - as Prof. Robert Wistrich documents in painful detail

in his exhaustive and landmark study, "A Lethal Obsession: Anti-Semitism from Antiquity to the Global Jihad" - there are many who would see us gone - this message of Chanuka needs to be publicized more than ever. Not just to Jews who may tragically buy into the Muslim hateful rhetoric, but to KOL BA'EI OLAM, all of mankind.

Mesirat Nefesh

Chanuka, as we well know, is all about miracles, but what was rather strange was the complete surprise of the miracle itself when the Menorah was lit with oil for only one day. Apparently, when the Chashmona'im chose to light the Menorah and not wait the 8 days until new oil could be procured, an unanticipated miracle occurred. Unexpected, because after the destruction of the 2nd Temple, overt miracles had ceased. The Chashmonai'm had therefore no reason to expect any metaphysical event to take place. But it did. Why?

The Talmud (B'rachot 20a) raises an interesting question. "Why were the earlier generations deserving of miracles, but not ours, especially as our knowledge of Torah far exceeded theirs?" The answer: Because the previous generations knew what it meant to sacrifice (to be MOSEIR NEFESH) for HaShem's sake, and we simply lack the courage and willingness to act similarly.

To explain: the root NEFESH also means comfort, rest and convenience. Man's natural inclinations are to live life as comfortably as possible, a life without tension and struggle. Now, on one level, there is nothing necessarily wrong with this outlook. But realistically, no life is without its troubles and trials. And often, it is precisely by engaging in these challenges that some worthy project or initiative emerges. But for that engagement to be successful, we must be prepared to be MOSEIR (give up on) our N'FISHA (rest), to sacrifice the comfort of our status quo in order to accomplish. The many small but precious miracles we have enjoyed are a direct consequence of such daring effort and sacrifice.

The Maccabees could have easily waited eight days to procure new oil, or - given the emergency of the situation - they could have even used impure oil, but they chose otherwise. They displayed MESIRAT NEFESH, extraordinary and heroic courage, and HaShem rewarded them something equally extraordinary - miracles! And we can likewise be eligible for such miracles if we exhibit the same willingness to forego a contented "couch potato life" and engage in something great and worthwhile.

When we act heroically and sacrifice, and by the strength of our own will,

we display almost superhuman tenacity and resolve, we discover that the impossible becomes possible. True, it may not resemble the meta-natural miracle of old, but it is a miracle nonetheless and like the Chanuka saga, it all begins with us.

**Chanuka Samei'ach
& Shabbat Shalom!**

