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Chanukah: Miraculous Salvation Rabbanit Devorah Zlochower Dean, Maharat

Chanukah is here. My children tell me *Chanukah* is their favorite holiday; it has it all – delicious food, special rituals, presents, and, because there is no *issur melakhah* (prohibition on labor), they can use electronics! *Chanukah*, along with *Purim*, is one of two rabbinic holidays, and its celebration asks us to consider the rabbinic venture of creating rituals.

Let's consider the key ritual of this celebration; the institution of the special lights of *Chanukah*.

The Gemara in Shabbat 23a states:

Rav Hiyya bar Ashi said in the name of Rav, "One who kindles the lights of Chanukah is required to bless... What does one bless?" <i>Asherkedishanu bi'mitzvotav vi'tzivanu li'hadlik ner shel Chanukah</i> (God who sanctified us with God's commandments and commanded us to kindle the light of <i>Chanukah</i>). Where were we commanded? <i>Rav Avia</i> said, "You shall not stray from that which they (the judges) tell you neither to the right nor to the left (<i>Devarim</i> 17:11)." <i>Rav Nechemya</i> said, "Inquire of your father and he will tell you, your elders and they will say to you (<i>Devarim</i> 32:7)."	אמר רב חייא בר אשי אמר רב: המדליק נר של חנוכה צריך לברך... מאי מברך? מברך אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו להדליק נר של חנוכה. והיכן צונו? רב אויא אמר מלא תסור (דברים יז:יא). רב נחמיה אמר: שאל אביך ויגדך זקניך ויאמרו לך (דברים לב:ז).
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This series of *Amoraic* statements addresses the critical question: What allowed the Rabbis to create a ritual act in which a blessing is recited and not merely a blessing but a *birkhat ha-mitzvah* in which we state that God commanded us to perform this act despite the fact that it was the Rabbis who commanded us in their creation and institution of this Rabbinic mitzvah?

Two responses to this challenge are given. *Rav Avia* answers that every act of obedience to a rabbinic command is, in fact, an act of obedience to God. After all, God in the *Torah* instructs us to listen to the judges. This answer is quite far-reaching as it essentially collapses all rabbinic commands into Biblical precepts.

But this answer does not tell us why the Rabbis chose to create this ritual and endow it with a blessing.

Rav Nechemya addresses the specific ritual of lighting the *Chanukah* lights by citing a verse from the *Torah* portion, *Ha'azinu*.

Remember the days of old, contemplate the years of the generations, ask your father and he will tell you, your elders and they will say to you. (*Devarim 32:7*)

זכור ימות עולם בינו שנות דר
וּדְר שאל אביך ויגדך זקניך
וַיֹּאמְרוּ לְךָ. (דברים לב:ז)

We have been charged with a task of remembering our past, remembering the kindnesses that God has done for us. And, notes *Rav Nechemya*, not just to remember but to institutionalize that memory. *Vi'tzivanu* (God commanded us); the verse *Rav Nechemya* reads in *Devarim* as a positive commandment to keep alive our history and to concretize it through observances.

The creation of the holiday of *Chanukah* – the lighting of the menorah, the recitation of *Hallel*, the *Torah* readings – and yes, the food and the fun – are meant to remind us of God's role in our history.

The Rabbis ask us to relate to *Chanukah* not just as a military victory but as a miraculous salvation by God that reawakened our religious passions and brought us back to God's service.

Every year during *Chanukah*, we turn in prayer and thanksgiving to God for the miracles and salvations done for us. We are commanded to rekindle that passion, to rededicate ourselves to the worship of God and of seeing God's hand in our lives.

Al nissekha vi'al niflotekha vi'al yeshuatekha – for Your miracles, for Your wonders and for Your salvations.



Rabbanit Devorah Zlochower is Dean of Maharat and gemara and halakhah rebbe. She has taught gemara and halakhah for over two decades at Hadar, SAR High School, YCT Rabbinical School and Drisha Institute where she served as Rosh Beit Midrash and Director of Full time Programs for over a decade. Devorah was a member of the first cohort of Drisha's Scholars Circle. She lives in Riverdale with her husband, Rabbi Dov Linzer and their two sons.