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Chanukah and Shimon HaTzadik

Rabbi Jeffrey Fox

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The rabbis of the Talmud do something shocking. They choose to shift the focus of the Chanukkah Holiday away from a miraculous military victory of the few over the many towards the more spiritual miracle of the oil. This dichotomy is still preserved within the rabbinic canon as the text we recite as part of the *amida* and *birkat ha-mazon* focuses primarily on the war, while the Talmudic passage in Masechet Shabbat is about the miracle of the one cruise of oil lasting for eight days.

The Maharal, in his masterful commentary on the narratives of the Gemara wrote:

Maharal, Chiddushei Aggadot, Shabbat 21b ספר חדושי אגדות חלק ראשון עמוד ד - מסכת שבת

And if you will ask - and could we be required to give praise and thanks simply for the miracle of the oil, after all, that was simply for the purpose of completing a Mitzvah [and the proof is from the fact that in *al ha-nissim* there is no mention of the candles]? We can answer that Chanukah was essentially established upon the victory of the Chashmonaim over the Greeks. However, it was not plainly obvious that this victory was a miracle from God as opposed to the result of the great strength of the Chashmonaim. Therefore there was a miracle done via the candles so that all would know that the military victory was also miraculous.

כשנכנסו יונים להיכל. וא"ת וכי בשביל שנעשה להם נס בהדלקה ולא היה זה רק לעשות מצות הדלקה, היו קובעין חנוכה וכל נס שחייב להודת ולהלל הוא בשביל הצלתו ולא בשביל שנעש' לו נס לעשות המצוה, [וראיה כי בעל הניסים לא הזכירו הנס של הנרות כלל]. וי"ל שעיקר מה שקבעו ימי חנוכה בשביל מה שנצחו את היונים, רק שלא היה נראה שהי' נצחון ע"י נס הש"י שעשה זה ולא מכחם וגבורתם, ולפיכך נעשה הנס ע"י נרות המנורה שידעו שהכל היה בנס המלחמה ג"כ

Here the Maharal is aware of the shift the Rabbis made and explains simply the miracle of the oil was meant as reminder that the military victory was itself miraculous as well. Perhaps people would have been tempted to dismiss the military victory as one of strategy or preparation; says the Maharal the oil reminds us the war itself was only won with divine assistance.

I would like to offer a different approach to the rabbinic decision to make Chanukkah about light. Here is the classic passage from Masechet Shabbat that tells the story with which we are all familiar:

Bavli, Shabbat 21b

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף כא עמוד ב

What is Channukah? Our Rabbis have taught: On the 25th of Kislev begins eight days of Channukah upon which it is forbidden to give eulogies or to fast. For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they impurified all of the oil. And when the house of the Chashmonaim became strong and defeated them, they checked and could only find one cruise of oil that still had the seal of the high priest. There was only enough oil to last for one day. There was a miracle and they were able to light from it for eight days. In the next year they established and made these *yamim tovim* with *hallel* and *hoda'a* (thanksgiving).

מאי חנוכה? דתנו רבנן: בכ"ה בכסליו יומי דחנוכה תמיני אינון, דלא למספד בהון ודלא להתענות בהון. שכשננסו יוונים להיכל טמאו כל השמנים שבהיכל, וכשגברה מלכות בית חשמונאי ונצחום, בדקו ולא מצאו אלא פך אחד של שמן שהיה מונח בחותמו של כהן גדול, ולא היה בו אלא להדליק יום אחד, נעשה בו נס והדליקו ממנו שמונה ימים. לשנה אחרת קבעום ועשאום ימים טובים בהלל והודאה.

Given that the Rabbis understood the military victory to be miraculous, what value is there in adding another miracle into the story? Many answers have been offered to this question. Some focus on a matters of history and others remind us of the political enmity between the Rabbis and the Maccabees. I would like to offer a different approach that shifts away from these concerns and forces us to think about more fundamental issues.

Chanukkah celebrates the victory of a small group of Jews over the Seleucid empire. It reminds us we can defeat Greece as well as Greek culture. The Rabbis tell of another encounter with Greek culture that took place well before the time of the Maccabees. In order to understand its meaning we need to meet a great man known as Shimon ha-Tzadik.

We are familiar with Shimon ha-Tzadik from the second Mishna of Pirkei Avot where we learn what has become the mission of every synagogue in America. He teaches us that the world rests on three pillars - תורה, עבודה וגמילות חסדים - Torah study, service (worship) and acts of loving kindness. What is more interesting to me is that he is introduced in this Mishna as - משיירי אנשי כנסת הגדולה - of the final remnants of the Men of the Great Assembly.

That means he may have known people to whom we relate as prophets. Shimon ha-Tzadik, in this telling, represents the transition from prophetic Judaism to Rabbinic Judaism. The Gemara in Masechet Yoma tells a fascinating story about Shimon's encounter with Alexander the Great. We learn that the Samaritans convinced Alexander that the Jews in the Temple in Jerusalem are planning to rebel. They lead Alexander to Jerusalem with the intention of destroying the Temple. Shimon learns of the plan and he leaves the city wearing his priestly garments, in violation of Halakha, to greet Alexander as he arrives in Jerusalem.

When Alexander arrives he dismounts his horse and bows before Shimon. The Samaritans are shocked, and the following conversation ensues, as recorded in Massechet Yoma:

Bavli, Yoma 69a

תלמוד בבלי יומא דף סט עמוד א

They [The Kutim / Samaritans] said to him [Alexander], "A great king like yourself bows down to this Jew?" He said to them, "The image of this man helps me to win when I am at war." He said to them [the Jews], "Why have you come?" They replied, "Is it possible that non-Jews misled you to destroy the house in which they pray for you and for your kingdom not to be destroyed?" He said to them, "Who are they?" They said to him, "Those Samaritans standing beside you."

אמרו לו: מלך גדול כמותך ישתחוה ליהודי זה? אמר להם: דמות דיוקנו של זה מנצחת לפני בבית מלחמתי. אמר להם: למה באתם? אמרו: אפשר בית שמתפללים בו עליך ועל מלכותך שלא תחרב יתעור גויים להחריבו? אמר להם: מי הללו? אמרו לו: כותיים הללו שעומדים לפניך.

What I would like to extract from this story is that Shimon was able to defeat Alexander. Athens was on its way to Jerusalem and Jerusalem emerged victorious. This is a common trope in Jewish writings. It appears in numerous places in the writing of Rav Shlomo Wolbe, Rav Shimshon David Pincus and Rav Noach Bersovsky.

How were the Jewish People impacted by the coming of Alexander to Israel? The Midrash makes a radical claim about what happened when Alexander arrived:

Seder Olam Rabbah, Chapter 30

סדר עולם רבה (ליינר) פרק ל

And a mighty king shall stand up, that shall rule with great dominion, and do according to his will (Daniel 11:3) He is Alexander Macedon who reigned for fourteen years. Until then the prophets would prophesize with the spirit of holiness; from this time forward Incline your ear, and listen to the words of the chachamim...(Proverbs 22:17).

ועמד מלך גבור וגו' וכעמדו תשבר וגו' (דניאל י"א:ג), הוא אלכסנדרוס מקדון שמלך י"ב שנה, עד כאן היו הנביאים מתנבאים ברוח הקדש, מכאן ואילך, הט אזנך ושמע דברי חכמים (משלי כב ז).

Shimon may have been able to best Alexander in that fateful encounter, but the coming of Alexander wrought a fundamental change in the history of the Jewish People - prophecy was brought to an end. As Hellenism spread over the Land, prophecy was lost. The same Shimon who saved the Temple from the onslaught of Alexander and the Samaritans was also responsible for this shift. In the rabbinic view the same man who was of the "final remnants of the Men of the Great Assembly", who may very well have known Chaggai, Zecharya or Melachi, the concluding prophets, also brought prophecy to its end.

What does it mean that the coming of Alexander brought an end to prophecy? What the Rabbis may be saying is that we now have a new way to access the divine word. Sadly, we no longer hear the voice of God from heaven, but we can still access the divine will through the application of the tools

of human reason to God's Torah. It is this process of the unfolding of Halakha that grants us the access that was taken away.

In some small way, the Rabbis are telling us that we needed Greek rational thinking to get to this next stage of Jewish life. Shimon defeated Alexander, but he also learned something that would become an essential method for the understanding of God's commands in our life. Jerusalem may have defeated Athens, but Jerusalem would never be the same.

In fact, when you look at Rambam's commentary on Avot 1:2, something surprising emerges:

Rambam, Avot 1:2

He said that because of: philosophy which is Torah, and the lofty nature of personality traits which is *gemilut chasadim*, and the fulfillment of the Mitzvot of the Torah which is *korbanot*, that the world and the orderliness of its existence remain on the most complete path.

פירוש המשנה לרמב"ם מסכת אבות פרק א:ב

אמר שבחכמה [לפי קאפח צ"ל, "כי במדע." הערבי "אלעלם"], והיא התורה. ובמעלות המידות, והן גמילות חסדים, ובקיום ציווי התורה, והן הקרבנות - התמדת תיקון העולם, וסידור מציאותו על האופן השלם ביותר.

In Rav Kapach's Hebrew translation of Rambam's commentary on the Mishna we see something startling. Rambam says when Shimon ha-Tzadik uses the word "Torah" what he means is the Greek philosophy. For Rambam the Arabic term אלעלם - el-'alam - refers to the philosophy of his day. In Rambam's read Shimon may have defeated Alexander, but the Greek philosophy that Alexander brought to Jerusalem became part of the Torah. What Shimon was able to do was to encounter the world and take the best that it has to offer and appropriate those ideas into Jewish life.

Chanukkah celebrates the ability to engage the world and find the aspects of modernity that are meant to be incorporated into our lives . What then, does the story of Shimon have to do with the miracle of light? There is one last piece of the puzzle. Shimon was the High Priest during the second Temple. We know the office High Priest was not so prestigious during the Second Temple, however, Shimon was exception:

Bavli, Yoma 9a

Rabbah b. Bar Hana said, "...But the years of the wicked shall be shortened refers to the second Temple, which abided for four hundred and twenty years and at which more than three hundred [high] priests served. Take off the forty years which Simeon the Righteous served...

תלמוד בבלי מסכת יומא דף ט עמוד א

אמר רבה בר בר חנה אמר רבי יוחנן... ושנות רשעים תקצרנה זה מקדש שני, שעמד ארבע מאות ועשרים שנה, ושמשו בו יותר משלש מאות כהנים. צא מהם ארבעים שנה ששמש שמעון הצדיק...

Shimon served as the High Priest for forty years. Longer than any other High Priest of the second Temple. And finally we are told:

Tosefta, Sota 13:7

תוספתא סוטה (ליברמן) פרק יג הלכה ז

As long as Simeon the Just was alive the Western candle was always lit. When he died they found that it had been extinguished. Going forward they would sometimes find it lit and sometimes extinguished.

כל זמן שהיה שמעון הצדיק קיים היה נר
מערבי תדיר משמת הלכו ומצאוהו שכבה מיכן
ואילך מוצאין אותו פעמים כבה פעמים דולק

For the forty years of Shimon's service as High Priest the western candle remained lit. If you thought one cruise of oil lasting for eight days was a miracle, imagine one candle lasting for forty years! Perhaps when the rabbis of the talmud shifted away from the miracle of the war and towards the miracle of the oil, what they meant to do was move our attention back a few generations to another miraculous candle?

When we read about the small cruise of oil, I think we are meant to be reminded of Shimon ha-Tzadik and his momentous encounter with Alexander. The Rabbis are pointing us in another direction in an ever so subtle fashion so we can put together all these bread crumbs and gain a deeper insight into the celebration of Chanukkah.

The victory of Matityahu and the Maccabees was short lived; but Alexander and Shimon ha-Tzadik's meeting is felt in every generation. After all, that is the challenge of living in modernity - going out of one's comfort zone to greet the surrounding culture, appropriating the best the world has to offer, while maintaining a commitment to core Jewish values. Shimon left the walls of Jerusalem and put himself at great risk. Would he be able to overcome the destruction and seduction of Alexander? Thank God, Shimon was successful and we are the beneficiaries of that moment.

This year, when you light your Chanukah candles and share the story of the cruise of oil with your family, take a moment to thank God for the blessings and challenges of modernity. We live in a world that has so much to offer and, at the same time, can be so destructive. May we be granted the wisdom of Shimon ha-Tzadik to understand which values of the 21st century are meant to be part of Torah.



Rabbi Jeffrey S. Fox, Rosh HaYeshiva of Maharat, was the first graduate of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah. Upon graduation he served as the Rabbi of Kehilat Keshet: The Community Synagogue of Tenafly and Englewood for seven years. In Rabbi Fox's tenure at Keshet, the community grew three-fold from thirty families to nearly one hundred. During that time Rabbi Fox also taught at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah as well as the Florence Melton Adult Education School in Bergen County. He also served on the board of the Synagogue Leadership Initiative of the UJA of NNJ. Rabbi Fox is a Senior Rabbinic Fellow of the Shalom Hartman Institute and has also been a member of the faculty of the Drisha Institute, the Florence Melton Adult Education School in Westchester County, and Hadar.