



The Chanuka Miracle and Jacob's Jar of Oil

By Jonathan Neril

The miracle of the Chanuka lights is well-known. After the Hasmonian Jews defeated the Syrian Greeks, they sought to rededicate the Temple in Jerusalem and light the Menorah. However, only one small vessel of oil was found, with enough oil to burn for a single day. Yet the Menorah miraculously burned for eight days. What is less well-known is how the miracle came to be. This drash will explore one teaching on the miracle of the oil, and a lesson it can offer to us in our modern times.

Rabbi David Hertzberg z"l writes:

According to an oral tradition, as explained by the Imrei Noam,¹ the olives from the branch that Noah [Noah] received from the dove were made into pure olive oil. The oil was given to Noah's firstborn, Shem. Shem, otherwise known as Malchizedek, the priest to the Most High Hashem—sealed this little jar of oil and gave it to Abraham as a gift. Abraham, in turn, handed it over to Isaac who passed it down to Jacob. According to our sages, Jacob forgot some small jars on the other side of the Jabbok River and returned to retrieve them. One of these jars was the oil from Noah's ark. Jacob prophetically hid this oil at the site of the Holy Temple and laid the foundations for the miracle of Chanuka. This is the oil that originated with the dove, the symbol of peace, and continues to shine until the Messiah comes.²

That is, according to the Imrei Noam, the oil of the Chanuka came from oil that was pressed several thousand years earlier and passed through the hands of the great spiritual masters of our tradition.

Rabbi Shlomo Luria (the MaHarshal, Poland, 16th century) saw a related but different connection between Jacob's small jars and the Chanuka miracle. He taught that “the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Yaakov, ‘you risked your life for a small vessel for My sake, and therefore I Myself will repay your descendents through a small vessel for the children of Hasmonians, who made a miracle through a small vessel.’”³

1 Rabbi Horowitz of Dzikov, a Chassidic Rebbe circa 1865 (in his book Imrei Noam: Moadim, on Chanuka, pages 100-130),

2 Pri Mayim Chaim, 2003, Shir L'Shlomo: Jerusalem, p. 20-21

3 Maharshal as quoted in Tzedah L'derech, commentary to Genesis 32:25, by Rabbi Yisachar Ber Ailanberg, Moravia, 1510-1623. This quotation of the Maharshal by R' Ailanberg differs slightly from the Maharshal as recorded in his book Yeri'ot Shlomo, although the essential meaning remains the same. The Maharshal understands the Talmud's and Rashi's use of 'small vessels' as not referring specifically to multiple vessels, but to one vessel.



According to Rabbi Luria, while the vessel of oil that Jacob recovered was not the same one burned in Chanuka (as the Imrei Noam understood it), the vessel was nonetheless linked to the Chanukah miracle in that the Divine rewarded Jacob's descendents by providing them a vessel of oil that burned for eight times its estimated time.

What was so significant about Jacob's action to merit such a miracle? In the Torah portion of Vayishlach, read this year the week before Chanuka, Jacob brings his family and possessions across the Jabbok stream before his epic encounter with his brother Esau. The rabbis of the Talmud explain that he re-crossed the stream at night to recover a few small vessels he forgot to bring across.⁴ Why did Jacob, facing an imminent confrontation with Esau and his 400-man militia, leave his family alone and vulnerable at night to recover a few forgotten flasks?

The basis for Jacob's action becomes clearer when one examines his worldview. Jacob understood that everything in our possession comes from G-d, has a specific purpose and must be used to its full potential. Elaborating on this, Rabbi Zadok HaKohen Rabinowitz (of 19th century Poland) teaches that the righteous

“do not take that which is not destined for them from Hashem... That which is not created for this specific person is like stolen property when they are in possession of it, and thus [the righteous are careful] not to take possession of it. Because of this, property that is assigned to and created for them is very precious to them—so much so that our patriarch Jacob risked his life for his property. Thus ...it was said in the name of the Yehudi Hakadosh: a righteous person is obligated to enjoy an object which is fitting for him even if it means risking his life. That is why Jacob-- who knew that the small vessels were his, appropriate to his soul, and created for him—risked his life to save them.”⁵

Thus Jacob went back for the vessels to ensure they were used in the optimal way. Had he not, their full potential would not have been realized. The truly righteous recognize the value of their G-d-given possessions, and are very careful with them, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant they are. While not overly attached to material things, they do not dispose of objects prematurely or use them inappropriately. They understand that everything has a purpose, and they seek to use things to that purpose, with the goal of elevating the objects and themselves.

Jacob's example of valuing his possessions presents a particular challenge to us living in a

4 Genesis 32:25. Babylonian Talmud, Chulin, 91a. Midrash Agada—Buber on 32:25. Rashi on 32:25.

5 Pri Tzadik (Rabbi Zadok HaKohen Rabinowitz of Lublin (Kreisburg, 1823- Lublin, Poland, 1900)) on Pesach, p. 36b, in Kol Mevaser, ed. Yehuda Menachem Boem, Raanana, Israel, 1992. Kol Mevaser is a four-volume anthology of Hasidic teachings. Translation here by J. Neril.



modern, “disposable” age. Recognizing this trend, in 1955, the retailing analyst Victor Lebow highlighted a trend in consumer society, away from greater mindfulness regarding possessions and toward a more short-term view. He wrote:

Our enormously productive economy...demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption...We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever increasing rate.⁶

Today we live in a society with a very different orientation to material objects than Jacob—a society that throws away useable items because they are a few years old and maybe outdated by new products; discards clothing and appliances and buy new ones instead of repairing them; and buys goods usually wrapped in disposable packaging.

It is little wonder then that we are facing an ecological crisis. The natural world itself has been turned into commodity to be extracted, used and disposed of. Even more than the population growth concerns of generations past, today’s high levels of consumption are driving the latest global environmental challenges.⁷ Our ecological challenges thus arise in part from the way we relate to our possessions. We appreciate their short-term value, but all too soon dispose of them. .

In our times, Chanuka is precisely the time of year when we most encounter our relationship with possessions. At this time of giving and receiving *things*, we can re-evaluate our relationship to possessions and look for less wasteful ways to use the resources of the earth. For example, instead of buying and giving new gifts, we might consider more renewable ways of gift giving, like sharing books, trading old toys with our neighbors, wrapping gifts in old newspapers, or giving gifts of charity in honor of loved ones.

Finally, through kindling the Chanuka flames, we can shed new light on how we use energy. The miracle of Chanuka being eight days had a practical significance—during those eight days the Jews were able to press new oil from the winter olive harvest to burn in the Temple's menorah, so that on the ninth day they had new oil to use. Olive oil is bio-fuel, a renewable resource: the olive tree will produce another crop of olives next year. According to Jewish law, olive oil lamps are the ideal

⁶ “The Journal of Retailing,” Spring 1955, p. 7.

⁷ See research on 'ecological footprints' that highlight the central role of consumption in driving environmental impact, available at http://www.rprogress.org/ecological_footprint/about_ecological_footprint.htm . Also, see the IPAT (Impact = Population x Affluence x Technology) equation, which describes a formula for assessing human impact on the environment, see

<http://www.sustainablescale.org/ConceptualFramework/UnderstandingScale/MeasuringScale/TheIPATEquation.aspx>



Chanuka lights.⁸

Lighting with olive oil can help us connect to the holy use of our resources, from the renewable olive oil of the Hasmonians back to the oil vessels of Jacob and Noah. This year, may our Chanuka lights inspire us toward responsible and holy use of everything that comes into our possession.

⁸ Rama to Orech Chaim 673:1 in the name of the Mordechai, Kol Bo, and Maharil.
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