

Half the Hanukkah Story

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This drasha was given by Rabbi Lamm in the Jewish Center in NYC on Shabbat Chanuka, December 23, 1967. Courtesy of Rabbi Lamm and the Yad Lamm online drasha archive of the Yeshiva University Museum.

Two Themes of Hanukkah

Two themes are central to the festival of Hanukkah which we welcome this week. They are, first, the *nes milhamah*, the miraculous victory of the few over the many and the weak over the strong as the Jews repulsed the Syrian-Greeks and reestablished their independence. The second theme is the *nes shemmen*, the miracle of the oil, which burned in the Temple for eight days although the supply was sufficient for only one day. The *nes milhamah* represents the success of the military and political enterprise of the Macabeeans, whilst the *nes shemmen* symbolizes the victory of the eternal Jewish spirit. Which of these is emphasized is usually an index to one's Weltanschauung. Thus, for instance, secular Zionism spoke only of the *nes milhamah*, the military victory, because it was interested in establishing the nationalistic base of modern Jewry. The Talmud, however, asking, "What is Hanukkah?," answered with the *nes shemmen*, with the story of the miracle of the oil. In this way, the Rabbis demonstrated their unhappiness with the whole Hasmonean dynasty, descendants of the original Macabees who became Saducees, denied the Oral Law, and persecuted the Pharisees.

Yet, it cannot be denied that both of these themes are integral parts of Judaism. Unlike Christianity, we never relegated religion to a realm apart from life; we never assented to the bifurcation between that which belongs to God and that which belongs to Caesar. Religion was a crucial part, indeed, the very motive, of the war against the Syrian-Greeks. And unlike the purely nationalistic interpretation of Hanukkah, we proclaim with the prophet (whose words we read on the second Sabbath of Hanukkah), "For not by power nor by might, but by My spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts." In fact, the Macabean war was, to a large extent, not a revolution against alien invaders as much as a civil war against Hellenistic Jews who wanted to strip Israel of its Jewish heritage. Hence, Hanukkah symbolizes a victory through military means for spiritual ends. That is why rabbinic sources tell of both themes, the Pesikta speaking of the *nes melhamah*, and the Gemara speaking of the *nes shemmen*.

It is interesting that the dual themes adumbrated in the Hanukkah narrative are anticipated in the Sidra we read on the first Sabbath of Hanukkah. Young Joseph has two dreams, the first of which is equivalent to the *nes milhamah* and the second reminiscent of the *nes shemmen*. In the

first dream he sees himself and his brothers *me'almim alumim*, binding their sheaves in the field, and the sheaves of the brothers bow down to his sheaf. This is clearly a materialistic dream - he wants to take over the food industry and corner the grain market. The second dream is a more spiritual and cosmic one: it is a dream of *shemmesh ve'kokhavim*, the sun and the stars and the attainment of spiritual preeminence.

Even more interesting is the reactions that these dreams evoke. When Joseph tells his brothers of his dream of the *alumim*, we read: *va-yosifu ode seno oto*, they hated him even more. When he tells them of his dream of the sun and the stars, we read: *va-yekanu vo ehav*, his brothers were jealous of him. The material dream evokes *sin'ah*, hatred; the spiritual dream arouses *kin'ah*, jealousy. We Jews are hated for our *nes milhamah*, and we are envied for our *nes shemmen*.

The State of Israel, in our day, has fulfilled the first dream. The *alumim* of the State of Israel, its farms and its fields, its towns and villages and cities, are comparatively safe and secure. We have achieved a miraculous victory in *milhamah*, the recent war. The result has been predictable – *sin'ah*, hatred. Let us not be blind to the nucleus of animosity that is latent even in the admiration which has been expressed for the State of Israel as a result of its military successes. Perhaps I am naive, but I have abiding "faith" in the silent anti-Semitic potential within a good deal of this expression of worldwide applause for Israel. The best proof - General DeGaulle, whose press has protested his remarks, but whose countrymen seem more and more to have responded by reverting to their old anti-Semitism. The General declared that Israel is "a war-like State bent upon expansion," and that Jews are "an elite people, sure of itself and dominating." Why? Because Israel dared to succeed without first begging his leave. How revealing is his further comment: "Jews provoke ill will in certain countries and at certain times." There it is: *sin'ah*, hatred provoked by the success of our *alumim*, by the accomplishment of our *nes milhamah*. Throughout the ages non-Jews have circumscribed our areas of endeavor. They gave us no farms for our *alumim*, and then hated us when we overcame these limitations nevertheless. They pushed us into money lending, and detested us when we became bankers. They allowed only the very uppermost echelons of our young people to get themselves a university education, and then they declared their hatred for us when this group succeeded in producing the world's leading financiers and scientists, doctors and men of culture. They confined us to squalid ghettos and expected to crush our dignity — but they were furious when we emerged with our dignity intact, when, in the words of Joseph's dream, *ve'hineh kama alumati ve'gam nitzavah* - our sheaf stood upright, unbent, un-submissive. Their hostility was boundless when all their oppression resulted in our possessing a fabulously noble religion, a cultural level second to none, and a superb moral life. Definitely, in general, we are "elite, sure of ourselves, and dominating." No people that has had to endure what has been wished upon us, and has survived with our quality, is anything less than "elite" and "sure of itself." Hence our heritage of *sin'ah*, the ill-will we have "provoked" in so much of the world.

But now that Israel, for itself and all the Jewish people, has fulfilled the first dream, the time has come to realize the second, the vision of *shemmesh ve'kokhavim*. Now, just as we have earned the world's *sin'ah*, we must deserve their *kin'ah*.

What is *kin'ah*? It is not envy, pure and simple. Some modern scholars (Brown, Driver, and Briggs, Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament) relate the Hebrew word *kin'ah* to the Arabic root *kanaa* which means to turn red as with a dye. In other words, it means to blush, to be embarrassed. The Hebrew *kin'ah* is thus a rather complex phenomenon, one of its components is the feeling of embarrassment, of self-criticism which results in an awareness of one's shortcomings as he measures himself against the object of his *kin'ah* and which therefore, may hopefully lead him to transcend himself and inspire him to greater achievement. To inspire such creative *kin'ah* is, in essence, a moral task and an educational function. Our duty at the present stage of our history is to arouse the world's *kin'ah*, and thus make the rest of the world yearn for our spiritual achievements, for our miracle of oil, and thereby prove the correctness of that verse by King Solomon, *kin'at sofrim tarbeh hokhmah*, that envy (in this sense of creative *kin'ah*) amongst scholars can only increase wisdom in the world.

Indeed, just as Joseph beheld first his *sin'ah*-inspiring material dream, and afterwards rose to his *kin'ah*-provoking spiritual vision, so too, the miracles of Hanukkah are sequential: first there was the *nes milhamah*, and then later came the *nes shemmen*. This is reflected in our *al ha-nissim* prayer which we recite all through Hanukkah. We thank God for the miracle of our victory, for having given over *giborim be'yad halashim, rabbim be'yad me'atim* - the strong in the hands of the weak and the many in the hands of the few ... *ve'ahar ken*, and afterwards, *ba'u vanekha l'devir betekha*, Thy children came into Thy holy habitation, cleansed Thy Temple, purified Thy sanctuary, and kindled lights in Thy holy courts.

I submit that those two little words, *ve'ahar ken*, "and afterwards," define the position of world Jewry today. We have finished one half the Hanukkah story. We have accomplished the *nes milhama*, the miracle of military victory, and now we must proceed to the *nes shemmen*, to the miracle of the conquest of the Jewish spirit. We have realized the dream of the *alumim*; next we must proceed to the inspiring vision of the *shemmesh ve'kokhavim*.

Can it be done? Most certainly! I am more optimistic now than I have ever been before in my life that this, indeed, can be achieved. As an example, permit me to bring to your attention a revealing report in this past week's "Maariv," one of the leading newspapers in Israel. One of its most distinguished reporters, Geulah Cohen, interviewed General Ariel Sharon, who is one of the most popular heroes of the young generation of Israelis, and is widely known by his affectionate nickname Arik. Arik, the commander of the Negev and the conqueror of the Sinai, might well be considered the quintessential Sabra. In the course of the interview, he was asked, "I understand that when you came to the Western Wall, a Hasid gave you a pair of tefillin and asked you to wear them and that you did so. How come, why so suddenly?" The self-confident Arik for the first time turned somewhat shy. "Yes", he answered, "I did do just that". And here follows a remarkable insight: "I do not identify myself", said Arik, "with those who hate religion. On the contrary, I respect those who believe. Indeed, I believe in those who believe. I am genuinely sorry that I was never taught enough about Judaism. Thus, when I came to the Wall, I had very deep feelings that I wanted to express, but to my dismay I discovered that 'li ein millim; la-yehudi ha-dati yesh', I had no words, whereas the religious Jew does!"

This recognition is a historic achievement. Now it becomes our sacred duty, the sacred duty of all religious Jews, to give the Ariks the "words," the spiritual wherewithal to continue to the next glorious chapter in Jewish history of our times. Let us give them, and our American Jewish youth, the stuff with which to finish the second half of the Hanukkah story, with which to perform the second miracle, that of the *nes shemmen*; with which to realize Joseph's second dream; with which to excite mankind's envy, its creative *kin'ah* of our spiritual and moral success, and not only be afraid and hostile because of our material and martial conquests.

Then, having made this second dream a miraculous reality and having provoked the world to emulate our moral attainment, will we be able, with complete justification, to conclude the *al ha-nissim* prayer with the words *le'hodot u-le'hallel le'shimkha ha-gadol*, now we may thank and praise the great name of Almighty God for ever and ever.

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