



## CHANUKAH AND THE MISSING TEXT

**T**he Gemara in *Yoma* 29a records that the story of Esther was the end of all miracles.

Incredulously, the Gemara asks: But what about Chanukah! Chanukah is a celebration of miracles that chronologically comes after Purim. As such, how could the Gemara indicate that the miracles ended with the story of Esther? The Gemara ultimately distinguishes between Purim, whose miracles are permitted to be recorded in writing, and Chanukah, whose story is *not* permitted to be written down formally. Accordingly, we do not find the story of Chanukah in the cannon of Tanach.<sup>1</sup>

From the Gemara's response, it is clear that Chanukah is indeed a holiday of miracles, one that presumably warrants celebration like the days of miracles that came before it. And yet, for some outstanding reason, we are not

permitted to write down the miracles of Chanukah —they may be transmitted only orally.

In that vein, there is not merely a distinction between Purim and Chanukah, but between Chanukah and all other holidays! Other than Chanukah, each holiday has entire sections of Torah (or in the case of Purim, a megillah) outlining its respective details and characteristics. More than that, the lack of formal writing of the miracle of Chanukah seems to place it in the domain of *Torah She'baal Peh*. Yet whereas every other holiday has its own *Masechta* [tractate] in *Shas* dedicated to expounding its respective laws and themes,<sup>2</sup> Chanukah is referenced in merely a few *dapim* in *Maseches Shabbos* in what seems to be a tangential discussion. Moreover, Chanukah is mentioned only a handful of times in all of *Mishnayos*, and there

too, its reference is as a side point. How can it be that Chanukah — the holiday of *hallel* and *hodaah*, which the Gemara itself seems to acknowledge is a holiday of miracles — has almost no references in Torah *She'baal Peh*? What underlies the lack of written text celebrating the Festival of Light?

Rav Yitzchak Hutner zt"l, in his *Pachad Yitzchak* on Chanukah, sheds light on these questions through a passage in the Gemara, *Gittin* 60b. The Gemara discusses how much of Torah was written down, and cites a pasuk from Hoshea 8:12:

אכתוב לו רובי תורתי כמו זר נחשבו.

*Though I write for him never so many things of My Law, they are accounted as a stranger's.*

*Tosfos* in *Gittin* 60b (s.v. *Atmuhei*) explains that were all of Torah to be written down for Klal Yisrael, the *umos*

*haolam*, the other nations of the world, would undoubtedly go on to write it down themselves, to copy it. This is why Hashem instructs that a portion of Torah — *Torah She’Baal Peh* in particular — *not* be written down. Rav Hutner explains that had it been written down, such a phenomenon would introduce an element of “*zarus*,” of the “strangerhood” to which Hoshea was referring; In such a scenario, a barrier between *Knesses Yisrael* and Hashem would be created, one that would make Klal Yisrael like “outsiders.” If every nation has equal access to all of Torah, what would make our bond with Hashem unique?

A beautiful medrash (*Medrash Tanchuma Ki Sisa* 17) echoes a similar sentiment. Working off the same pasuk in Hoshea, the medrash explains that Hashem gave over the entirety of the Torah to Moshe at Har Sinai, including *Mikrah* (Torah), *Mishnah*, *Aggadah*, and *Talmud*. After He finishes, Hashem commands Moshe to go and teach all of it to His children. Moshe, presumably

with excitement, tells Hashem “[We should] Write down the Torah for Your children!” Hashem responds: “I also *want* to give Bnei Yisrael the Torah in writing. However, I know that *were* it to be written down, in the future, the *umos haolam* would seize control of the Torah, and take it from the Jewish people.” Once every nation has access to the Torah, there is no distinguishing Klal Yisrael from any other nation. As Hashem exclaims, were the Oral Torah to be written down, “My sons would be like the *umos haolam*!” Hashem ultimately concludes that *Mikrah* can be written down, but the other parts of Torah would remain oral, so that Klal Yisrael’s singular access to *Torah She’Baal Peh* will serve as a distinction (*mavdil*) between Klal Yisrael and the other nations going forward.

However, it is not just that *Torah She’Baal Peh*’s remaining unwritten maintains Klal Yisrael’s “insider access,” but it informs it. Our “insider access” that comes by virtue of the unshared *Torah She’Baal Peh* is the basis of our

unique relationship and covenant with Hashem. Rav Hutner gleans this idea from the continuation of the Gemara in *Gittin* 60b.

א"ר יוחנן: לא כרת הקב"ה ברית עם ישראל  
אלא בשביל דברים שבעל פה, שנאמר: הכי על  
פי הדברים האלה כרתי אתך ברית ואת ישראל..  
*Rabbi Yochanan says: The Holy One, Blessed be He, made a covenant with the Jewish people only for the sake of the matters that were transmitted orally [baal peh], as it is stated: "For on the basis of [al pi] these matters I have made a covenant with you and with Israel" (Exodus 34:27).*

Rav Hutner explains that it is not just that the Torah being written down and available to other nations would mitigate Klal Yisrael’s special connection with HaKadosh Baruch Hu by making them like everyone else, but that *Torah She’Baal Peh* and its reliance on oral transmission captures the essence of the covenant. In fact, the exclusivity of *Torah She’Baal Peh* is both the necessary precondition and the purpose of Klal Yisrael’s *bris* with



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Hashem. Hashem's prohibition to write it down is built-in as the foundation of the covenant itself!

Along these lines, Rav Hutner also highlights the Gra's distinction between the phrases "*asher bachar banu*," that Hashem chose us, and "*asher nasan lanu*," that Hashem gave to us, in *Birchos HaTorah*. The Gra explains that Hashem's "*bechira*" of Klal Yisrael happened on the second day of Sivan, when the covenant between Hashem and Bnei Yisrael began. The premise of this covenant was *devarim shebaal peh ee atah rashai l'kosvan*, the principle that generally forbids the recording of *Torah She'Baal Peh* in writing. Only after the formation of that exclusive bond — Hashem and Bnei Yisrael, to the exclusion of all other nations — could the Torah be given four days later, as demonstrated by the word "*nasan*." The prohibition against writing down *Torah She'Baal Peh* is not a specific prohibition among all other prohibitions in the Torah, but, as Rav Hutner notes, is the crucial covenantal framework of exclusivity in which all the specifics of the Torah need to be contextualized.

Appropriately, the exclusive and uniquely bonding medium of *Torah She'Baal Peh* perfectly captures the struggle and victory of the Chashmonaim. As Rav Hutner notes, their fight was not about specific laws

of the Torah, per se, but about the singularity of the Jewish people. The acculturation of Jews around them and rise of Hellenism threatened to dilute their distinctive identification as the children of Hashem. If Klal Yisrael is too impacted by outside influences — if we are just like everyone else — we lose our "*yichud Yisrael*," our singularity among the nations. If we are like all the other nations, our relationship with HaKadosh Baruch Hu will not be unique.

Integral to the essence of Chanukah is the relationship of exclusivity that Klal Yisrael has with Hashem, of which *Torah She'Baal Peh* plays a critical role.<sup>3</sup> As such, it is not that the miracles of Chanukah ideally should have been written down, but as a technicality, we are prohibited from doing so. Rather, the omission of Chanukah in rabbinic literature perfectly encapsulates the essence of the very miracle we are celebrating.<sup>4</sup> Along these lines, it is fitting that Chanukah is not only sparse throughout *Torah She'Baal Peh*, but that its story was not canonized in Tanach, in the written Torah. The triumph of Chanukah is not solely about the specifics, about particular laws written in the Torah, but about the preservation and ultimate thriving of the "*yichud Yisrael*," the singularity of the Jewish people.

## Endnotes

1. The Gemara explains that when it states that the story of Esther is the end of all miracles, it means within holidays that are allowed to be written down.
2. With the exception of Shavuot, which will be addressed in footnote 4.
3. Rav Hutner notes that nowadays, when *Torah She'Baal Peh* has been written down in order to ensure its continuity (see *Temurah* 14b), there are still ambiguous references throughout the written-down *Torah She'Baal Peh* that require a mesorah, an oral recounting of our traditions, in order to fully understand the meaning, depth, and magnitude. For example, principles like *ein seder l'Mishnah*, *chisurei mechsera*, and *aniyim b'makom zeh v'ashirim b'makom acher* require oral transmission from a rebbe or teacher, perpetuating the "insider access" that informs and maintains our unique exclusive bond that Klal Yisrael has with HaKadosh Baruch Hu through His *Torah She'baal Peh*.
4. If the paucity of Chanukah's presence in rabbinic literature is a fundamentally intentional omission that captures the essence and themes of the day, it is appropriate that Shavuot, another holiday celebrating *Torah She'baal Peh* and the crucial role it plays in our relationship with HaKadosh Baruch Hu, is not explicated in its own *Masechta*. Though the korbanos and agricultural aspects of Shavuot are discussed at length in *Maseches Menachos*, there is significant ambiguity in *Torah She'bichsav* as to the date/timing of Shavuot. This ambiguity relies and depends on the input and explanation of Chazal, highlighting what Rav Rosensweig shlit"a calls our "junior partnership" with Hashem. While their focus is slightly different, both Shavuot and Chanukah collectively demonstrate the exceptional and pivotal role that *Torah She'baal Peh* plays in the formation and cultivation of our exclusive bond with Hashem.

