



# Clilei HaChodesh

כִּלְעֵי  
הַחֹדֶשׁ

CHANUKAH 5777

## *Torah Thoughts from the YIGC Community*

*In this Chanukah edition of Clilei HaChodesh, contributors explore our struggles to recognize Hashem's involvement in earthly affairs and to sustain our efforts to fulfill His will. Alan Schabes uncovers what might be the earliest written record of theological debate; Rabbi Baum and Rabbi Landis examine aspects of keeping sight of the Divine in our lives; and Rabbi Berger suggests a message in the connection between the Menorah and the Maccabees' dedication.*

### **AVRAHAM AND NIMROD – THE FIRST KIRUV CONFLICT?**

*Alan Schabes*

At the end of פרשת נח, the Torah tells us that “Haran died before Terach, his father, in the land of his birth, in אור כשדים” (Bereishit 11:28), but it does not provide us with any details about this death or its significance. Clearly, if it merited a mention in the Torah, there must be some significance or lesson to be learned from the death of Haran.

Rashi, in his commentary on פסוק כח, provides us with more details about Haran's death:

And the Midrash Aggadah (Gen. Rabbah 38:13) relates a tradition that he died *because of* his father. For Terach complained to Nimrod about Abram, his son, for crushing his [Terach's] idols; so he [Nimrod] cast him [Abram] into a fiery furnace. Haran sat and thought, “If Abram is victorious, I am on his side, and if Nimrod is victorious, I am on his side.” When Abram was saved, they said to Haran, “Whose side are you on?” Haran said to them, “I am on Abram's side!” They cast him into the fiery furnace and he was burned. This is the meaning of אור כְּשָׁדִים: the fire of the Chaldees.<sup>1</sup>

If one examines the Rashi closely, there clearly appears to be something more going on. When Rashi describes Haran's internal dialogue, he states that Haran is using the verb “נצח” – **to win**. What was going on there? Was there some kind of competition? Why didn't Haran simply state that, if Avram somehow survived the *kivshan ha'eish*, that he would support him? Obviously there is more to the story.

1. Translation modified from [www.chabad.org](http://www.chabad.org)

The rest of the story can be found in Bereishit Rabbah 38:13. The midrash provides us with a detailed description of a fierce theological dispute that had transpired between Nimrod and Avram:

They said [to the king]: let us worship the fire. Abraham said to them: [rather] let us worship water, for it extinguishes fire. Nimrod agreed: let us worship water. Abraham continued: if so, let us worship the clouds, which carry the water. Nimrod agreed: let us worship the clouds. Abraham continued: if so, let us worship the winds that scatter the clouds. Nimrod agreed: let us worship the winds. Abraham continued: if so, let us worship humans who can withstand the wind. Nimrod replied: You're just speaking words - I only worship fire. I will throw you into it, and the God you worship can save you from it. Haran was hidden and was of two minds, saying [to himself]: if Abraham is **victorious**, I will say I am with Abraham, and if Nimrod is **victorious**, I will say I am with Nimrod... <sup>2</sup>

We see in this midrash that the interchange between Avram and Nimrod was not merely the execution of a punishment against Avram for breaking his father's idols. Rather, this was a defining moment in history. It *was* a competition, a debate between the monotheism of Avram and the polytheism or idolatry of Nimrod: the stakes were high in determining who would be **מנצח**, **victorious**. Haran, who was witnessing this debate, died as a result of seeing Avram survive the *kivshan ha'eish* of Nimrod – thereby demonstrating, in dramatic fashion, the primacy of monotheism.

While this could easily be the end of the story, I would like to suggest that there was something more – something very personal – that served as the background to the debate between Avram and Nimrod. In Parshat Lech Lecha (14:14), the Torah tells us about the war between the five kings and the four kings, and that Lot, the son of Haran, had been captured. The pasuk states that Avram “heard that Lot had been captured, and he assembled 318 men from his household and pursued Lot’s captors until Dan.” Rashi, in his commentary on this pasuk, states that Avram did not really take 318 men. Rather, it was Eliezer who accompanied Avram on his rescue mission. Rashi supports this by pointing out that the *gematria* of אליעזר is 318. The *Targum Yonatan* on that same pasuk reflects this tradition that only Eliezer accompanied Avram, but with a startling detail: he refers to Eliezer, almost in passing, as “נמרוד בר נמרוד” – Eliezer, the son of Nimrod. Eliezer, the trusted *eved* of Avram, was the son of none other than Nimrod, who had tried to kill Avram!

I would like to suggest, therefore, that the dispute between Avram and Nimrod was much more personal. Avram was the first *kiruv* professional. One of his prized successes was the conversion of none other than Eliezer, the son of Nimrod. Nimrod, who was the champion of polytheism, was faced with the devastating loss of his son, and heir, to Avram and his monotheism movement. As a result, as a last ditch effort, Nimrod engaged in a theological debate with Avram in an attempt to stop Avram and his movement. What we see is that Nimrod lost the debate, due to Avram’s survival, and then faded into obscurity. On the other hand, Avram and Eliezer became, respectively, the first patriarch of Bnei Yisrael and the person who facilitated Yitzchak’s marriage to Rivka – thus ensuring the continuity of the Avot and of *Klal Yisrael*.

# CHANUKAH GIFTS: DO THEY BELONG UNDER A TREE?

*Rabbi Pinchas Landis*

Every year, as Chanukah approaches, I am baffled by a tremendous irony. As we drive through the streets and walk through stores, there is one thing that slaps everyone in the face: "Christmas is coming!" The decorations are up long before Thanksgiving, the sales have already started, and the music is playing, and playing, and playing. One would have to be comatose to miss the fact that the biggest holiday on the Christian calendar is right around the corner. And, in truth, this modern version of Christmas has revolutionized Chanukah as well. The same stores that have all the Christmas decorations save a small space for their token Chanukah display; the mall has its token menorah right next to Santa; and of course, politically correct well-wishers make sure to include Chanukah with the relatively generic "Happy Holidays." A few years ago, they were actually marketing Chanukah stockings!

But the influence of Christmas on Chanukah goes deeper. To where, you might ask? The presents. Since I am not a Christian theologian, I do not know the source for gift-giving at Christmas. On the other hand, I *am* a rabbi, and after many years engrossed in Jewish studies, I can honestly say the same thing about Chanukah: I have no knowledge of a Jewish source for giving gifts on Chanukah. Giving holiday gifts *is* a Jewish concept: The Code of Jewish Law<sup>1</sup> says clearly that to enhance the joy of a holiday, a husband should give his wife new clothes or new jewelry for the holidays and parents should give their kids treats. However, this Jewish tradition of holiday gifts applies to the three Torah festivals; I hardly think that this is the source for the widespread trend of giving *Chanukah* presents in particular. After all, you don't see Hallmark marketing "Passover wrapping paper" or a jewelry store having a Succos sale.

What, one might ask, is the big deal if we give gifts specifically on Chanukah? It makes everybody happy!

This brings us to the irony I mentioned in the introduction. What are we celebrating on Chanukah? Many in the hands of the few? Correct. Oil lasting for eight days? Right. Military victory over our Syrian-Greek oppressors? True. But I think there is a core issue that ties all of these events together. Chanukah was not really a war against the Greeks; it was a war against Greek **culture**, or Hellenism. Now, do Jews really take issue with other cultures? Usually not enough to go to war. When does another culture become a threat that must be fought? Only when it begins to take us over.

At the time of the Maccabees, Hellenism had taken over the Jewish world so much that many Jews were more Greek than Jewish. They had adopted names like Hyrkanus and Aristobulus. They played sports in the nude and read Aristotle and Plato. There was actually a procedure developed that undid the circumcision! When the war broke out, who was really fighting? It was Jew against Jew. The Jewish people were fighting their brethren for spiritual survival. We were fighting to stop this wave of assimilation that had engulfed the Jewish world. The Greeks were a secondary problem. And this is what we are truly celebrating on Chanukah: the survival of Jewish culture over the Greek culture.

The irony: Here is the holiday on which we commemorate the fact that at one point in history, a foreign culture infiltrated us so completely that everything that was Jewish started to look and sound Greek. On Chanukah, we celebrate our triumph over that influence. And how do we celebrate it? Presents (like the Christians), decorations (like the Christians) and STOCKINGS! I think that we can all see that there is something wrong here.

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1. ש"ע או"ח תקכ"ט:ב

As Chanukah approaches, we should all take some time and think. Think about the lives we live. Are we driven by Jewish values or by Western values? Is our Jewish education on par with our Western education? These are the questions on which we should be focusing as the eight days of Chanukah approach. As we stare at the light of the menorah and spin those dreidels, we should let the truisms of Chanukah penetrate our hearts, and make a firm commitment to live as Jews.

I will say in conclusion, however, that there is no problem giving gifts on Chanukah. Just make sure that you do it on Purim, Pesach, Shavuos, and Succos as well!

## KISLEIV - THE MONTH OF FOOLISHNESS

*Rabbi Simcha Zev Baum*

*Almost thirty years ago, when I was in the fifth grade, my day school principal, Rabbi Raphael Skaist, substituted for a Rebbe who was delayed, and began his class with what amounts to the first paragraph of this essay. Before he was able to finish his thoughts, the Rebbe arrived. After about twenty five years, I met him and asked him for the conclusion - which is what you see in this article!*

The Jewish month within which the holiday of Chanukah falls is called *Kisleiv* (כסלו). In Hebrew, the word **כסיל** (the root of the word **כסלו**) means fool or foolishness. There is a passage in Tehillim (92:7-8) which states:

מה רבו מעשיך ה' מאד עמקו מחשבותיך, איש בער לא ידע ו**כסיל** לא  
בין את זאת. בפרוח רשעים כמו עשב...

How great are your deeds, Hashem; exceedingly profound are your thoughts. A boor cannot know, nor can a fool (**כסיל**) understand this: when the wicked bloom like grass...."

Now if this verse referred to a straightforwardly foolish person, what would be its novelty? Of course a foolish person will not understand deep philosophical issues such as the apparent success of the wicked. The verse seems to be telling us then, that even a highly intelligent individual can sometimes be regarded as "foolish."

The Syrian Greeks had an extremely advanced scientific and philosophical culture. They were advanced both economically and technologically. They were the superpower of the world at the time of their rule over Judea. They were certainly what we can safely describe as an intelligent people. Yet they were foolish. They disregarded man's ability to affect the Divine. They saw the world and understood much of its science, they appreciated and created physical beauty - but they couldn't see the Godliness in the world. They saw this world as a humongous playground within which to eat drink and be merry. They couldn't recognize the divine hand which reaches toward this world to orchestrate events within it, and they couldn't recognize the potential for man to reach toward G-d via this physical world. They took their gods and made them physical and finite rather than accept a power that their finite minds could not grasp.

It is interesting to note that what the Greeks banned from Jewish practice was Kiddush Hachodesh (sanctification of the new month by the Jewish court), Shabbos observance and Bris Milah.<sup>1</sup> The common thread which connects these particular commandments is the Godliness within our world and the ability of physical humans to affect the world through divine decrees. Sanctification of the new month gives mitzvah observance a hand in the natural course of astronomical events. Shabbos recognizes G-d's creation of the world and His continued involvement in its running. Bris Milah asks us to perform a mitzvah which gives us the ability to "perfect" G-d's creation.

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1. Megillas Antiochus

Only intelligent human beings can have a significant grasp of science, physics, mathematics and the like. But when one attributes an intrinsic life value to these topics he is a fool. Certainly the knowledge of these remarkable concepts is fascinating and important, but one must realize that the sciences are nothing more than G-d's infinitely intelligent way of running the world. The true value must be given to the world of spirituality. This world, along with all of its wisdom and brilliance, is no more than a tool by which to attain spirituality. The world is not an end; it is a means. It is a means by which to achieve closeness to G-d when we use it in His service.

The month of *Kisleiv* can be understood now as the month of "foolishness." It is the month when a highly intelligent culture was really a culture of "fools." It is the month when foolishness was conquered by the Chashmona'im. Jewish holidays are not simply commemorative; rather the times within which they fall are infused with the qualities that produced those past events. The month of *Kisleiv*, and particularly the holiday of Chanukah, is a time that is conducive to reflection upon our own lives and for reprioritization. What is really important in our lives? What has real intrinsic value and what is simply a tool by which to achieve what really is important?

## MARTYRDOM AND THE MENORAH

*Rabbi Moshe Berger<sup>1</sup>*

The only source in classical rabbinic literature that describes the miracle of the oil in the menorah lasting for eight days is a quote from Megillas Taanis found in Tractate Shabbos 21b:

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

After the Chasmonaim's victory, they searched and were able to find only one jar of oil with the Kohen Gadol's seal, which was sufficient for only one day; a miracle occurred and they were able to light from that oil for eight days.

This source does not offer any purpose behind the miracle, such as that the priests required eight days in order to procure oil. The Gemara simply reports that one day's amount of oil miraculously lasted eight days.

Perhaps the miracle was meant as a divine indication that during those eight days of rededication - *Chanukas Habayis Ve'hamizbe'ach* - Hashem Himself, as it were, chose to light the menorah and thus to participate overtly in the rededication.

This decision of Hashem to leave His realm of elusive, transcendent hiddenness and to manifest His presence explicitly in the material world **mirrors the decision** of the Chashmona'im to abandon their normal realm of self-preservation and enter the realm of martyrdom for the sake of preserving the purity of our relationship with Hashem.

***Ani l'dodi ve'dodi li...***

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1. This dvar Torah was originally published online at <http://www.torahfountain.com/chagim-holidays-yomim-tovim/hannukah/102-martyrdom-amd-the-menorah.html>

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