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The Keren Ha-Shor and Its Symbolism

By Chana Schuster

In the second passuk of the Torah, the Earth is described as “Tohu va-vohu ve-choshekh al penei tehom” (Bereishis 1:2). The Midrash reveals that these four adjectives allude to the four exiles which the Jewish nation was to confront. Choshekh, our Sages teach, refers to the period when the Greeks dominated Israel, since “they darkened the eyes of the Jewish people with their decrees.” They would command, “Write for yourselves on the horn of an ox that you have no portion in the G-d of Israel!” (Bereishis Rabbah 2:4)

One might wonder why the Greek subjugation of Bnei Yisrael is singled out as the exile of darkness. Aren’t all exiles dark? Additionally, what is the significance of the Greeks demanding that the Jews renounce their faith by writing on the horn of an ox?

The Gemara states that after his sin, Adam brought an ox with one horn as a korban (Avodah Zarah 8a). The Shelah elucidates the concept of korbanos as follows: By bringing an animal as a sacrifice to HaShem, an individual demonstrates that, through sinning, he has reduced himself to the level of a beast. Offering a korban to HaShem illustrates that he is aware of this. However, the individual must also recognize that he can surmount his challenges and correct his sins. This understanding precludes any possibility of him saying, “I’m only an animal – what do you expect from me?”

It is for this reason that Adam brought an ox with a horn. The Hebrew word keren, horn, can be translated to mean “a beam of light” as well. Before sinning, Adam was a loftier, more spiritual being whose face actually radiated light. By offering HaShem an ox with a keren, Adam was demonstrating that although he had erred, thereby equating himself with an animal, he strove to return to his original exalted level.

The debate between the Greeks and the Jews was an ideological one, fought over the nature of man. The Greeks emphasized physical prowess and beauty, since they believed that man can only aspire to develop himself in the physical realm. In contrast, the Jews maintained that physicality is inherently worthless; only by elevating it to the service of G-d does it obtain value.

The debate, then, was over “the horn of the ox,” i.e. whether man can aspire towards personal development beyond the domain of the physical. Greek philosophy insisted that man is merely an ox, a physical being, and therefore, should work to develop himself into the best ox or physical being he could become. Yes, man is an ox, countered the Maccabim, but an ox with a horn. Symbolically, this represents our surety that man can and must strive for something higher. Consequently, the Greeks stipulated that we renounce our faith by writing on the horn of an ox, emblematic of our understanding of man’s function in this world.

Let us now return to the question of why the Greek exile is specifically characterized as dark. When one’s ability to see is diminished, he knows to move carefully. It follows, then, that darkness would be most...
dangerous if one does not realize that it is dark, and consequently does not proceed with caution. When Haman threatened to annihilate us and when Rome took us as captives, we felt the darkness. But when the Greeks began befriending us and subtly forcing their foreign philosophies upon us, many did not perceive this invasion as darkness. In fact, a large number of Jews actually believed the Greeks were introducing light! This is the worst kind of darkness: the kind one is not aware of. The Maccabim, recognizing the darkness for what it was, declared war on this “enlightenment.”

If the battle was waged over the true value and role of man, at what point were we victorious? If we were to point to our military success, we would ironically be defining our triumph in their terms! And so, as soon as the military struggle was won, the Maccabim hurried to restore the Beis ha-Mikdash and its service – at which point they were truly victorious. In so doing, they assigned a higher purpose to their military victory.

It is interesting to note that this concept can be derived from the name of the holiday itself. There are two classic explanations for the title “Channukah.” First, it is seen as relating to the rededication of the Beis ha-Mikdash (channukas ha-Bayis). Second, the word Channukah is comprised of “chanu khaf-hei,” referring to the fact that the Maccabim were able to rest from battle on the 25th of Kislev. Perhaps, we may now say that we can more fully understand the holiday by combining these two explanations. The exceptional accomplishment of the Maccabim was that they dedicated the Beis ha-Mikdash on the very day they rested from battle, thus illustrating that without that, their victory would have been incomplete and meaningless. As if to say, the entire purpose of fighting was to enable the Jewish people to rededicate the Beis ha-Mikdash and to serve HaShem.

The prayer of ‘Al ha-Nissim seems to focus almost entirely on our military success, with only a few words at the end referencing the miracle of the oil lasting for eight days (“ve-hidliku neiros be-chatzros kadshekha”). Why is this miracle, focal to the celebration of Channukah, mentioned as a postscript? The miracle of our success in battle, we can explain, was only complete with the lighting of the menorah. Our newly-secured freedom was expressed in the performance of this mitzvah.

The Greeks celebrated the natural workings of the world, including the immutable laws of nature. The Greeks believed that man, a part of the natural world, is immutable as well, and therefore unable to overcome his physical inclinations. Man, proclaimed Greek philosophers, is an ox without a horn. The Maccabim disputed this approach, opining that man can, indeed, rise above his nature. Their position was proven correct with the supernatural event that followed the war. The oil miraculously burned for eight days and nights, demonstrating that the laws of nature can be suspended for the service of HaShem. And just as oil can supersede its nature for the service of G-d, affirmed the Maccabim, man can as well.

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The Illumination of the Menorah

By Este Stollman

Sometimes, life feels like a spinning carousel, a whirling blur of confusion, doubt, and worry. However, subsumed in the blend of colors surrounding oneself is the unmoving, yet motorizing, core source of everything, HaShem. Our job is to focus on the Primary of all colors, of all hints and hues. Quite often, we remain, befuddled with abstract concepts in our hearts and minds and wait to see those principles play out in actuality. We know that
HaShem is behind everything in our lives, but do we really believe this? Do we see and recognize the illuminating Force behind all the darkness and perplexities that we experience?

In the Channukah story, the Maccabees won the war against the Hellenists and restored the Second Temple. Among the havoced destruction, the High Priest found one untouched jug of oil, which fueled the radiating Menorah for not only one day, as was naturally expected of the amount contained within the jug, but lasted for seven more days. The Maharal, based on Kabbalistic texts, maintains that the number seven symbolizes nature and serves as the building block for phenomena in this world. To elaborate in a relatable, modern-day sense: In terms of geography, there are seven continents, seven seas, and America is composed of seven times seven states plus Hawaii, which was added to the US in 1959 (I drink lots of Snapple). In sports, there are seven innings in a baseball game, the #7 car is the most important in NASCAR racing series, and there are seven members in a team for cross-country running and track heptathlon. In terms of music and literature, there are seven natural keys in an octave, there are seven books in the famed Harry Potter series, and seven dwarves in Brothers’ Grimm fairytale of Snow White. In terms of technology, there are seven digits in a telephone number (since that’s the maximum of psychological chunking a person can keep in his brain) and Apple just came out with iPhone 7. Well, that’s a whole lot of fun facts for you. But, the point is that seven represents the natural concepts of this world, and the fact that the lighting of the menorah lasted that long shows the importance of zooming in on the wonders of our lives, the goodness that HaShem radiates throughout our days and experiences. The branches of the menorah also hint to this, signifying the seven main, levelled branches with the extra shamash above them all, fueling them with light. Although quippy in its own right, our vital job is to find the oil in the turmoil and turn our tzarah into a tzohar, a light source (which is derived by implementing the exegetical technique of hippukh ‘osiyos).

Following the Sages’ saying that HaShem precedes the healing before the affliction (‘Otzar Midrashim, sim. 8), we must key in on the fact that He always prepares an antidote for our suffering, a way for us to get better, even before it actually happens. It is hard to complain about the tzarah one is going through when fully understanding HaShem’s kindness to help us through. The tzarah itself is not for us to figure out or delve into; our job is to concentrate on the tzohar that HaShem predestined and subsequently provides.

We presented here an abstract concept played out for us clearly in the historical Channukah story. How do we see the actualization of this intangible principle in our own experiences and present-day lives of 2016? Once we believe that HaShem’s guiding hand leads us through our personal moments of challenge and triumph, it is much easier to pinpoint these concepts in our subjective realities. The paradigmatic Biblical sufferer, King David, wrote “It is good to thank HaShem and to sing to Your Superior name—to say of Your kindness in the morning and [to have] Your belief at nights” (Psalms 92:2-3). A basic question one can ask is on the seemingly incongruous parallel structure of these verses: Why does King David use a singular form for morning, but a plural form for night? I would like to suggest that there are many forms of darkness, but there is only one kind of light. Although there are multiple types of suffering, there is only One Savior to bring us out of the shadows and illuminate our lives. Throughout the myriad complications of life, there is always One singular, overarching Reality that holds us steadfastly to Him.

We learn from the menorah in the Channukah story that we cannot question why HaShem puts us in suffering, but how He brings us through. In the
Channukah: A Time for Rededication and Renewal

By Reena Evans

In the 2nd Century BCE, Antiochus sought to Hellenize his Jewish subjects by outlawing public Torah study. In response, the Sages established public readings of the Neviim, a practice we continue to this day in the form of the Haftarah. There is a beautiful passuk in the haftarah for Shabbos Channukah, which is from the Navi Zekhariah (2:14-4:7): “Not by army and not by strength, but by My Spirit said the Lord of Hosts”. This passuk teaches us two major lessons. First of all, HaShem is the only true cause of our success. Secondly, the value of our accomplishments is only in the ruchani realm (spiritual, related to HaShem), “My Spirit” in the above passuk, involving our relationship with G-d and the resting of His Spirit in this world, not our own physical success, might, and valor. (Chayil, translated as “army” in the above passuk, can also mean valor, as in the phrase eishes chayil, woman of valor.)

The power of relying on and following HaShem is the power to achieve renewal after destruction. The book of Zekhariah takes place at the beginning of the return from the Babylonian exile after the destruction of the first Temple. The Persian king, Cyrus, had given permission to rebuild the Beis ha-Mikdash, but it had yet to occur. HaShem sent His prophet to admonish Israel to be more zealous about rebuilding the Beis ha-Mikdash. The theme of rebuilding and rededicating the Beis ha-Mikdash greatly parallels Channukah, the rededication of the Beis ha-Mikdash after its conquest and defilement at the hands of the Greeks.

In one of the most famous prophecies in Zekhariah, toward the beginning of the haftarah, HaShem shows Zekhariah a vision of Yehoshua, the High Priest, wearing filthy garments, “מצבת זאטו,” standing before an angel and the accusing Satan. Metzudas Dovid explains that the filthy garments refer to Yehoshua’s failure to protest the continuing sin of his sons, who remained married to non-Jewish women. The angel of HaShem tells Yehoshua to remove the filthy garments, “זאטו.” He then stands dressed in royal garments and a “/headpiece,” a pure turban, one of the garments of the High Priest. The angel then assures Yehoshua in the name of HaShem that if he will follow the ways of God, he will be able to be the High Priest and stand among the angels. This is a striking example of “I have pardoned your sin.” Yehoshua can experience repentance, renewal, and success in his position as the kohen gadol only “if you will walk in My ways.” With a rededication to the service of HaShem, he can begin anew, even after sin and exile.

The story in this haftarah has much in common with the story of Channukah. We need look no further than the “Al ha-Nissim” prayer. The first sentence states the dire straits in which we found ourselves when the Greeks attempted to make us forget Torah and mitzvos. The problem was not physical oppression, but spiritual oppression. In fact, the Maharal, in Sefer Ner Mitzvah, explains that there is no obligation to have a festive meal on Channukah as there is on every other holiday because a seudas hoda’ah accompanies a physical redemption, not a spiritual one. This shows that the main point of the miraculous deliverance of Channukah was the renewed ability to perform mitzvos, particularly lighting the menorah in the Beis ha-Mikdash. The military victory itself was certainly “I have pardoned your sin.” HaShem

“לא בחרי ולא בצחק כי אם ברוחי אמר ה’ צבאות; בראשות האמור הוא צבאות.”

- (Zekhariah 4:6)
The Maccabees led not just a successful military rebellion, but a teshuvah movement of sorts, a return of the Shekhinah to the Beis ha-Mikdash.

–Reena Evans

placed the strong into the hands of the weak because of their spiritual qualities; the righteous overcame those who sought to uproot Israel’s connection to God. The declaration of Zekhariah that all comes from HaShem and the value of all emanates from its spiritual relevance is precisely the opposite of the mindset the Greeks attempted to foist on the Jewish people. Chazal tell us that the Greeks commanded the Jews, “וַעֲלֵיהֶם בְּעָז רַע הואּ לִיָּהוּ אֱלֹהֵי יַרְעָלִים,” “Write on the horn of an ox that you have no portion in the G-d of Israel” (Bereishis Rabbah 2). The Greeks wanted to force the Jewish people into the mindset the Torah warns us to avoid, “וְזֶה רִיצָן יוֹתֵם נָשָׁה לְאֵל הָיָה,” “My strength and the might of my hand made me all this wealth” (Devarim 8:17). R’ Yosef Azar points out that keren means not just horn but also principle, money invested that yields profit. The principle is the root, the power behind something. The horn (the first meaning of keren) is of further significance because it is on the head of the animal, hinting at chakhmah, which was Yavana’s main strength. The Greeks’ tried to convince us to rely on our own physical and intellectual prowess by denying our connection to the One True Power. The miracle of Channukah was ample proof of the triumph of the approach of “אֵלָה בֵּיתוֹ הַבָּה יִכְאַרְדָּה,” nothing can be accomplished by one’s own might, but only by the Spirit of G-d.

Rebbetzin Smadar Rosensweig points out the power of a spiritual focus to achieve a successful new beginning, both in the times of the Maccabees and the returning Babylonian exiles. As we saw with the sons of Yehoshua in the time of Zekhariah, the Jewish people were mired in sin. Even the family of the kohen gadol, the spiritual leader of the people, had intermarried. At the time of Channukah too, the upper echelons of the Jewish people had become Hellenists, inimical to the raison d’etre of the Jewish people. The Maccabees came and purified the defiled Temple, allowing the Shekhinah to enter once again. So too, Yehoshua Kohen Gadol and Zerubavel reinstated the Shekhinah through the construction of the Second Temple. When one’s only agenda is “כִּי יְרָשָׁה,” there can be successful renewal and restoration.

There is great inspiration to be found in taking some time to sit and gaze at the flames of the menorah. We can view these flames as the torch of our Yiddishkeit, passed from generation to generation by those who understood “אֵל בֵּיתוֹ הַבָּה יָכַרְדָּה,” that our priorities must lie in the realm of ruchniyus. Channukah is a time of rededication, as it is its very name. The Maccabees led not just a successful military rebellion, but a teshuvah movement of sorts, a return of the Shekhinah to the Beis ha-Mikdash. After a busy season, the cycle of the year again brings us to another time of reflection. It is a good time to contemplate, “How have we been doing on our kabbalos, our resolutions and promises from the Yamim Nor’aim?” We must evaluate our performance and see how we can do better and how we can rededicate the bountiful lives that come to us not at all of our own hand but solely from God. Do we really understand that He runs the world and that the true path to both spiritual and physical success is “כִּי יְרָשָׁה”? The success that is attained only with sincere devotion to HaShem is the only one which will endure forever in this world and the next, just as the flames of the rededication of the Maccabees live on.
Clear Vision
by Mori Berman

Hindsight is always 20-20, and it is with this advantage that today we are able to look back on the Channukah story and declare what incredible miracles God performed for us during that time. Imagine if you were there then – how hard it would be to look with the same eyes at those miracles: For when you are stuck in the middle, when you cannot see the end, and you have forgotten the beginning, can you say with certainty that you would still remember God? Would you remember that He is both the good and the bad and that it is He who is behind every situation?

It is for this reason, that we read the story of the Maccabees, a story of strangers in a strange land, struggling to keep God’s commandments, despite the risks, challenges, and threats along the way. We encounter these people as strong, clear-headed individuals who knew and loved what they were fighting for. But fighting denotes difficulty, and it is not always easy to see everything as part of God’s plan, especially when it doesn’t look like God is involved. Sometimes we fail to see that the natural order of the universe is also a miracle – that what happens through direct cause and effect, though it may be scientifically explainable, is still God’s guiding hand.

Especially holy, and on a lofty level, the Maccabees, nonetheless, were human too, and no doubt had to work to find God in every part of their story. According to Rabbi Motti Rosen, the Maccabees actually had trouble realizing that winning the war was a miracle from God. It wasn’t until they found and lit the oil that lasted for eight days that they saw God clearly in the war as well. However unlikely, the war could have been explained away – attributed to nature, to human might or mistake. Additionally, they were also still in the middle; just because they had won the war, it didn’t mean their fight was over. It was not until eight days later, after the oil had lasted seven times longer than it should have, that the Maccabees were able to see, to look back, and equate the miracle of the menorah with the now clear miracle of the war.

And so, from the Maccabees we learn that Channukah is a time to seek God through all miracles, both the natural and the extraordinary, the large and the small. It is a time to learn what hides God and how to reveal Him, and that He is everywhere we choose to look. It is, overall, a time of faith, of remembering God – that it is for Him we fight, and because of Him that we win.