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In Memory of Rabbi Abraham Leibtag

Shiurim in Chumash & Navi by Menachem Leibtag

CHANUKA - ITS BIBLICAL ROOTS - Part Two

INTRODUCTION

In our first shiur on Chanuka, we discussed how the date - 25 Kislev - was not incidental. Rather it was intentionally chosen by the Hasmoneans to celebrate the dedication of the Temple because of its prophetic significance since the time of the prophet Chagai. [Recall how Chagai delivered his prophecy concerning the great potential of the Second Temple on the 24th of Kislev (see Chagai 2:10-24), as construction of that Temple was about to begin.]

In that shiur, we explained the significance of the 25th of Kislev during the Second Temple period, as its original construction began on that day. However, we did not explain why that day was originally chosen to begin that construction.

One could speculate that this date was simply incidental, i.e. it just so happened that the building materials were finally ready on that day. In the following shiur, we posit that this date may have been chosen intentionally, because of its significance - since the time of Creation!

THE FIRST WINTER

In Masechet Avoda Zara (see 8b), the Gemara records a very interesting Midrash about Adam ha-Rishon's first winter. First, the Mishna notes various pagan holidays when it is forbidden to conduct business (with idol worshippers). Then, the Gemara explains the origin of some of these holidays. In regard to the origin of Saturna and Kalanda, the Gemara records the following story. [As you read it, note how it relates to the time of year of Chanuka.]:

Kalanda is the eight days after the winter solstice, and Saturna is eight days beforehand. The Rabbis taught: As Adam ha-Rishon [created in Tishrei] noticed [during the first three months of his life] how the days slowly became shorter and shorter - He said: Woe to me, because of my sin [in Gan Eden] the world is getting darker [as soon there would be no more light] and will return to 'tohu va-vohu' - and this must be my 'death sentence'. [Instead of accepting this imminent fate, Adam ha-Rishon overcame his depression]

and took upon himself to fast, pray and repent.

After eight days, Adam noticed that the days indeed had begun to lengthen. Realizing that this is 'minhago shel olam' [the way of the world], he made a celebration for eight days [giving thanksgiving to the Almighty]. The next year, he made these days holidays. He [Adam] had good intentions [when making these holidays; however] they [his offspring] turned them into holidays of idol worship" (Avoda Zara 8a, see also Rambam Hilchot Avoda Zara - Chapter One).

[It should be noted that in the Roman Empire, a popular pagan holiday was celebrated at the end of December, which (according to historians) later evolved into Xmas.]

This Midrash already points to a thematic connection between Chanuka (an eight day celebration) and this time of year (the winter solstice). It should not surprise us that Adam ha-Rishon noticed this winter solstice, and properly related this phenomenon to God Himself; while his offspring (living in a pantheistic culture) instituted a pagan ritual to mark this critical time of the solar year.

However, this Midrash also alludes to a human psychological phenomena as well, i.e. what we call winter depression. [It is well known that lack of sunlight leads to depression.] Adam ha-Rishon did not simply give up [or get drunk at a New Year's party] at this depressing time in his life; instead, he transformed it into a time for introspection and repentance, with hope for a better future.

Now that we have found the 'roots' of Chanuka in the story of Creation, we will now examine other Jewish sources that relate to the importance of this time of the year.

BIKKURIM

A very interesting mention of Chanuka, once again in relation to the solar year, is found in Masechet Bikkurim. The Mishna (see I:6) states that Bikkurim [the first fruits] can be brought to the Mikdash [Temple] between the holidays of Shavuot and Sukkot. But if necessary, one can even bring them until Chanuka!

This Mishna suggests that Chanuka marks the very end of the agricultural year. [Recall that 'olives' are the final crop of the seven species to ripen in the land of Israel (usually in the early fall). In a very interesting article on this topic in Megadim vol. 8, Rav Yoel bin Nun suggests that, historically (during the first Temple period), this time of year may have included an 'olive oil' festival of some sort, marking the conclusion of the olive harvest and the year's oil

production.

Hence, we can assume that this time of the year already carried religious and agricultural significance during the First Temple period. We will now show why this time of the year took on historical significance as well, during the time period of the Second Temple. To do so, we must return once again to Sefer Chagai and history of 'shivat Tzion'.

IS THIS A TIME TO BUILD?

As we discussed in Part One of this Chanuka shiur, the 24th (or 25th) of Kislev was chosen as the day to begin construction of the Second Temple during the time period known as 'shivat Tzion' (Zerubavel et al - see Sefer Chagai & Ezra chapters 1->4). In anticipation of that momentous day (after almost twenty years of anticipation), Chagai delivered a very enthusiastic prophecy expressing the great hopes for that Temple.

When studying those events during the second year of Darius, it is not at all clear why that date was chosen to begin construction. After all, Chagai's first 'call for action' to build the Temple was delivered on the first of Elul that year (see 1:1). He delivered yet another speech on this same topic on the 21st of Tishrei (see 2:1). Yet, it is only several months later, at the end of Kislev when construction actually began (see 2:10, 15, & 18).

One could conclude that it simply took a few months to gather the necessary building materials, and hence the delay. However, when we consider the fact that it took some five years to build that Temple (see Ezra 6:13-15, re: its completion on 3 Adar, during the sixth year of Darius), the timing of this groundbreaking ceremony becomes even more difficult to understand. The question isn't why they waited so long, but rather why were they in such a rush to start! Let's explain why.

Anyone who is familiar with the weather in Israel knows that late Kislev is no time to start a building project. It's too cold and rainy. Why allow the wood to become damp (see Chagai 1:8), and why work in muddy and cold conditions. It would have made much more sense to continue gathering the material, but wait until the spring to begin the actual construction.

Instead, it appears that Chagai intentionally wanted to 'break ground' during this 'darkest time of the year'. Most likely, the 'heavy construction' only began in the spring, yet Chagai wanted to do something 'symbolic' that would lift the people's spirits at this significant time of the year. He

intentionally chose the last week of Kislev, because it was the darkest time of the year!

To appreciate this assumption, we must return once again to the description of this time period in Sefer Chagai and Sefer Zecharya, noting why the people's spirits needed some lifting. But first, we must explain the connection between 25 Kislev and the winter solstice.

THE DARKEST TIME OF THE YEAR

In a lunar calendar, it is impossible to set a precise date for the winter solstice. Nonetheless, because Nissan is always set for the spring by definition (see Shmot 12:1-2 and Devarim 16:1, note that if Adar is too early, we add a second Adar ['ibur shana'] to ensure the Nissan will become the first month of spring), the winter solstice will always fall either in late Kislev or early Tevet.

As the winter solstice is basically the longest night of the year, then these months are the 'darkest'. However, when we consider that the moon provides at least a small amount of light in the evenings; to find the 'darkest nights' of the year we must consider the phases of the moon as well. If you know your astronomy lessons, you'll remember that the darkest nights of any month is always during the last week (i.e. the fourth week of the month). During that week, the moon rises very early in the morning and wanes from a crescent to a sliver. For all intents and purposes, it remains unseen. Hence, the last week of any month is always the darkest.

Therefore, if we are to choose the darkest and longest nights in a lunar calendar year, the last week of Kislev is definitely the 'best choice'. [This can explain why Chanuka begins on 25 Kislev, and why 24 Kislev in Sefer Chagai could be considered more or less the same date.]

Let's return now to Sefer Chagai to explain how the events of 'shivat Tzion' relate to this 'darkest time of the year'.

LIFTING LOW SPIRITS

Recall Chagai's opening censure of the people in the second year of the reign of Darius:

"The people are saying - the is not the proper time to build a House for God..." (see 1:2-4).

Considering their situation, the people have ample reason to make such a claim. After all, only a very small group of people returned to Tzion, while the majority of Am Yisrael remained in Bavel. Furthermore, Israel had not regained its

sovereignty, while their economic situation remained quite pathetic (see 1:3-> 2:9).

This setting explains why it was necessary for Chagai to repeat his promise that both prosperity and sovereignty would return, should the nation indeed build the Mikdash.

To show how 'depressed' the people truly were during this time period, let's quote several statements of Chagai and Zecharya. For example, Chagai says:

"Who is there among you who remembers the glory of this House in its former splendor? How does it look to you now? It must seem like nothing to you! So be strong O' Zerubavel - be strong..." (Chagai 2:3-4).

[See also Chagai 1:13-14.]

"The glory of this latter House will one day be even greater than the glory of the First Temple, claims the Lord, and in this place I will grant prosperity and peace, declares the Lord of Hosts" (see 2:8-9).

Zecharya, a contemporary of Chagai (speaking during this same year - see 1:1), tells the sad people to rejoice:

"Roni ve-simchi bat Tzion - Be joyful and rejoice daughter of Tzion, for I am coming to dwell in your midst declares the Lord..." (see Zecharya 2:14).

Due to their predicament, as described by Chagai, the people are understandably quite sad; therefore Zecharya makes several efforts to give them hope. For example, after his famous vision of the Menora in chapter four, he explains how it is truly God behind this building project, warning the cynics not to make fun:

"Zerubavel's hands have founded this House, and Zerubavel's hands shall complete it! Then you will know that God has sent me - KI MI BAZ LE-YOM KTANOT - For who belittles this day of small beginnings! (see 4:8-10).

From Zecharya's statement, it is quite clear that there were many cynics who doubted the potential of this building project that was about to begin.

A TIME OF HOPE

Unfortunately, during the time of Zerubavel, these hopes were never fulfilled. In Part One of this shiur, we explained how the Hasmoneans may have understood their own military victory over the Greeks as a fulfillment of these prophecies. This also explained why they may have intentionally chosen the 25th of Kislev to mark the dedication of their rebuilt Temple.

However, towards the end of the Second Temple period, and especially after its destruction, the question arose as to whether there was any value in the continuation of the celebration of Chanuka. After all, why celebrate the re-dedication of a Temple that had been destroyed, and national redemption during a time of Exile. [Recall that all the other dates of Megillat Taanit had been nullified.]

Based on our above discussion, one could suggest a deeper reason for the celebration of Chanuka, especially after the destruction of the Second Temple.

After the 'churban' [destruction of the Temple], Chanuka marks not only a time to remember what did happen, but may also serve as a reminder of our hope for redemption, that could happen once again - should we be deserving. Even during our darkest times of Exile and destruction, Am Yisrael needs a yearly 'reminder' that there remains hope that one day the prophecies of Chagai and Zecharya will be fulfilled.

A FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS

This background can also help us understand the famous Gemara in Masechet Shabbat concerning the custom of lighting candles on Chanuka (see 21b). Recall how the Gemara explains that the original custom [i.e. before the 'mehadrin' customs] was simply to light one candle for each household ["ner ish u-beito"]. This 'original custom' now makes sense, for lighting a candle each night at this 'time of darkness', represents a sense of 'hope', and even more so when we consider the prophecies of Chagai and Zecharya.

Furthermore, lighting with olive oil at this time of year, takes on additional meaning, based on the laws of Bikkurim (noted above), and the completion of last year's fruit harvest.

It is interesting to note that Josephus, in Antiquities, adds an important comment re: Chanuka. Recall that Josephus himself was a 'kohen'; who participated in the great revolt against Rome (then 'switched sides' in the middle). He wrote his history works during the decade after the destruction of the Second Temple (some two hundred years after Chanuka). As he concludes the story of how the Hasmoneans dedicated the Temple on 25 Kislev, he makes the following remark:

"And from that time to this we celebrate this festival and call it LIGHTS. I suppose the reason was, because this liberty beyond our HOPES appeared to us, and that thence was the name given to that festival" (see Antiquities VII:7).

Here we find 'testimony' that soon after the destruction,

the focus of Chanuka had already turned to the custom of lighting candles - a holiday of LIGHTS - and the theme of this holiday relating to 'hope', and not simply thanking God for a military victory.

MAI CHANUKA?

This background can also shed light on the Gemara's question "Mai Chanuka" - What is Chanuka; and its subsequent answer relating to 'nes pach ha-shemen' - the famous miracle of the small flask of oil that lasted eight days [see Masechet Shabbat 21b].

As the Maharsha explains (ibid), the reason for celebrating Chanuka is not the miracle of 'pach ha-shemen', but rather the re-dedication of the re-built Temple ['chanukat ha-Mizbeiach']. The Gemara's question is not why we celebrate Chanuka, but rather for what reason do we light candles on Chanuka!

In a similar manner, the Maharal in "Chiddushei Aggadot" on Shabbat 21b explains that the primary reason for Chanuka was 'chanukat ha-mizbeiach', while the miracle was a 'sign from Heaven'.

But when we examine the miracle itself, it also echoes a similar theme of hope in a time of darkness. First of all, just the idea of finding one tiny container of pure oil is against all odds. But even more significant is the striking similarity between this miracle and the miracle described in II Melachim 4:1-7. In that story, a widow finds herself in a hopeless situation, as her creditors are about to seize her two sons as slaves in lieu of an outstanding debt. All she owns is a small jug of oil; but Elisha instructs her to use that small jug to fill up numerous empty vessels, which she can sell to pay back her debt.

Here we find a story of a widow in a destitute situation, where a small jug of oil represents her only ray of hope for a better future.

Carrying a very similar message, the story of 'nes pach ha-shemen' carries a similar message of hope for Am Yisrael, as we remember the glorious days of the Hasmonean victory.

The strength of the Jewish people throughout all generations has been its ability to remember its loftiest dreams even during times of its greatest despair. It is this theme that keeps Chanuka meaningful in every generation, especially in our own.

Furthermore, Chanuka should remain a meaningful time of the year for us, just as this was for Adam ha-Rishon - not only a time of hope, but also a time for introspection and

prayer.

As Chanuka approaches, let us 'hope' and 'pray' that the darkest times of our present crisis already lay behind us, and that we can look forward to a time of spiritual growth and prosperity.