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Why Did They Even Bother to Light the Menorah?

Question: What is the Mitzvah of the lights of Chanukah – lighting them or placing them in the correct place?

Answer: It is well-known that this is a dispute in the Gemara (Shabbat 22-23) as to whether the Mitzvah is the lighting of the Chanukah lights, or whether the Mitzvah is that the lights be placed in the proper spot, i.e. lit for a certain period of time. What is the difference? One example is in a case where someone who is not obligated in the Mitzvah, like a non-Jew, kindles the lights and then a Jew, who is obligated, picks them up and puts them down. If the

Mitzvah is the actual lighting, since the lights were kindled by someone who is not obligated, the Jew cannot not fulfill his obligation with them. If, however, the Mitzvah is placing the lights, even though the lights were kindled by someone who is not obligated, since they were put down by the Jew, he does fulfill his obligation. The Halachah is that the actual lighting is the Mitzvah (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 675:1). This is also verified by the blessing itself: "Who has made us holy with His Mitzvot and commands us to light...".

Based on this discussion, we can ask: What exactly was the miracle of Chanukah? Was the miracle the actual lighting of the Menorah in the Temple or was the miracle that they were lit for a certain period of time? The miracle seems to be that they were lit for a certain period of time, since there was no problem lighting the Menorah – there was enough oil for one day! If we say that the miracle was the actual lighting of the Menorah, what was the miracle?

Answer: The miracle was that it took great strength to be bold enough to even light the Menorah in the first place. They could have said: "Why should we light it? It needs to be lit for eight days before new oil will be ready. It isn't worth it to light it for one day." But they did not say this. They said: "Hashem

commanded us to light. We will light. What will be tomorrow? We don't know.

Hashem will decide." The same is true of the revolt. "You are going to rebel

against the Greeks?! You think you can win?! Sure you can begin a battle, but

how are you going to win? Why even start then?" "We were commanded by

Hashem, so we will begin. After that Hashem will decide." There was a great

miracle, but they didn't know that this was going to occur when they began.

This is "Mesirat Nefesh" – true self-sacrifice. There are many example of great

self-sacrifice in our tradition, but the miracle of Chanukah is unique. Up to this

point, there were always prophets. Here, however, there were no prophets to

give direction. They acted because they understood what Hashem

commanded them to do.

This is similar to the question of why Yom Ha-Atzmaut was established on the

5th of Iyar in particular, since on that day no miracle occurred. The Jewish

State was declared, and with it a life-threatening situation began (Chanukah

and Purim were established on the day after the "war" ended). Our Rabbi,

Rav Tzvi Yehudah Ha-Cohain Kook, explained that the courage to declare the

State is the miracle of miracles, the soul and root of all of the miracles and

wonders (Le-Netivot Yisrael vol. 1, p. 179). The Talmud discusses a shepherd who abandoned his flock, leaving it prey to either a wolf or a lion who came and tore it to pieces. The Rabbis established that his responsibility for the slaughter depends on whether or not he would have been able to save the animals. If he would not have been able to overcome the attacking animal, he is exempt from all payment. The Talmud asks: Why is this so? Perhaps it would have happened as for David: "Your servant slew both the lion and the bear" (Shmuel 1 17:36)? Perhaps a minor miracle would have occurred (Baba Metzia 106a)? The Tosafot described the miracle: "A spirit of courage and the knowledge to wage war" (Tosafot *ibid.*). So too in the matter of the declaration of the State: "The awakening, the exerting of effort, the philosophizing and the strengthening for the drive to rescue and revive," is a miracle from the Heavens, "with a supreme and inner stimulus of power." The fact that the Nation of Israel was filled with the spirit to fight and the knowledge to wage war is the foundation of all miracles (Le-Netivot Yisrael *ibid.*). From this act flowed all of the miracles which led to establishment and strengthening of the State of Israel.



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