

Hanukkah Sources



Kedushat Levi (*Kedushat Hanukkah* #5)¹

The Talmud teaches that the commandment of lighting Hanukkah candles should be performed “between sunset and the time when feet disappear from the marketplace” (b. Shabbat 21b)...

Know that the miracles our Creator has performed for us are divisible into three categories. There are hidden miracles and revealed ones. The revealed miracle, like those that took place for our ancestors in Egypt, including the ten plagues and the splitting of the Red Sea, involved a change in the natural order. Everybody witnessed these miracles. But then there are hidden miracles, like those that took place in the days of Mordechai and Esther, things that appeared natural... so too the [Hanukkah] miracle... is a hidden miracle. It came partly through battle; the same is true of the story of Judith. These really were miracles, not natural occurrences, but they happened in a secret way. This was noted by [Rabbi Loew of Prague,] the author of *Or Hadash*, who said that the miracle of Hanukkah came about partly through natural means. Our teacher R. Dov Bear taught that the revealed miracle is called “day” and the hidden miracle, like that of Purim and Hanukkah, is “night.” It is something that is not known to all, like the night in which not everyone can see.

Now the hidden miracles themselves can be divided into two categories...

There are thus three levels of miracle. The great miracle called “day” is that of the Exodus from Egypt, where nature is changed. Less than that is Purim, which seems partly natural, called “night” by our master and teacher, a hidden miracle without human aid.

And the third level, less than Purim, is that of Hanukkah, a hidden miracle in which there is human participation.

That is why, following the [fall festival season], Hanukkah comes first, then Purim, and then Pesach. “We go up in holiness, and not down” (b. Shabbat 21b). We draw forth the lights and grace of Hanukkah, which are not so great, since this was a hidden miracle accomplished with human help... Then we rise up to Purim, a hidden miracle in which humans did not act... and then we rise again to the holy state when we can receive the great lights of Pesach, the revealed “daytime” miracle that is seen by all...

.... That is why the mitzvah is to be performed “between sunset and the time when feet [*regel*] disappear from the marketplace.” The setting sun refers to the hidden miracles, those that are not so easily seen. “Until the *regel* disappears from the marketplace” — **you have to contemplate the Hanukkah candles until you overcome your sense that the world is conducted by the ordinary (*hergel*) force of nature.** Such an idea comes to you from forces that lurk without, the evil

¹ Kedushat Levi in *Speaking Torah: Spiritual Teachings from Around the Maggid’s Table (Volume 1)*, ed. Arthur Green, Ebn Leader, Ariel Evan Mayse, and Or N. Rose (Woodstock, VT, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013), 195-197.

urge, the “marketplace.” When you kindle Hanukkah lights, this thought disappears from you, and you no longer see the world as ordinary...

In this way you come to the faith that the hidden miracle is not merely natural, but that God is constantly re-creating the world, in every hour and moment. Sometimes He re-creates the natural order set into motion in the six days of Creation, and sometimes He changes something, like a revealed miracle. **But once you accept that there are hidden miracles, you realize that all is constantly being re-created, even the established natural order...**

Some Questions:

- What is the Berditchever communicating here about miracles?
- How is Hanukkah understood here?
- Do you feel like you have been aware of experiencing any of the three levels of miracles in your own life? When? Which ones haven't you experienced?
- How might we cultivate an awareness of these miracles? How can Hanukkah help us in that?
- Do we agree with his designations of the three levels of miracles? Specifically, think about the Purim story and how he understands the actions of Esther...

Some Comments:

This *drash* provides a beautiful example of the way in which word-play is an integral part of Hasidic spirituality. The whole logic of the homily rests on a re-reading of the classic Talmudic source through the shared letters of *resh*, *gimel*, and *lamed*:

רגל *regel* (foot) and הרגל, *hergel* (ordinary/normal)

This type of word play is commonplace in Jewish sources, and particularly in the mystical tradition. The other piece is the assertion that “marketplace” can denote the evil urge. The Talmudic source is thus re-understood as: **the lighting of the Hanukkah candles is a recognition of the miraculous nature of everyday reality, which is only misunderstood when our evil urge disways us.**

Rabbi Kohenet Jill Hammer

1. *Green Faith Video*²

Hanukkah is the rededication of the Temple. And the mystics have always said that the Earth is the Temple. And the Temple is the Earth. On Hanukkah we rededicate the Temple. **This Hanukkah let's rededicate ourselves to caring for the Temple of life on which we all live.** This Temple has been desecrated, it has been polluted. We commit to heal it. We commit to cleanse it and make it beautiful again.

Divine Presence, we ask for your Blessing as we do this work. Teach our eyes to see you light in all living things and guide our hands to rebuild your Temple and make it new.

2. *Jewish Book of Days*³

Once the new moon was announced, bonfires were lit in the hills above Jerusalem. Far-flung communities would see the bonfires and light their own, until all the Jewish communities knew that the new moon had come. As stars help a ship locate itself on the sea, the bonfires helped Jews locate themselves in time, joining them to the root consciousness of their people. According to Rabbi Judah, the 1st of Kislev is the first day of winter in Israel (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzi'a 106b). **We are close now to the darkest days of the year, and the new moon bonfires remind us of the Hanukkah candles growing each night. The flames teach that when the moon is dark, we can expect its face to shine again, and when the sunlight is dimming, soon it will begin to grow again.** This is true also for us: The quiet of introspection can and should lead to outward action in the world.

Some Questions:

- When do you feel most like the Earth is the Temple?
- What would it mean to “re-dedicate” our Earth/Temple?
- How does the second source's comparison of the moon cycle to the Hanukkah candles support the Earth-Temple parallel?
- How might this Temple/Earth and moon/candles metaphor connect to the Berdichever's assertion about the miraculousness of regular life?

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V3L2rEtObw8>

³ Rabbi Kohenet Jill Hammer, *Jewish Book of Days*, (Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society: 2006), 93.

Emmanuel Levinas (*The Light and the Dark*)⁴

The doctors of the Talmud, who introduced the festival of Hanukkah into the Jewish liturgical year and to whom we owe the annual ceremony of the kindling of lights, do not narrate the history of the Hasmoneans. They refer to it only in passing. The Talmud is silent on the national liberation of Israel during the reign of Judas Maccabeus. It retains one legendary episode from the period. This is the story narrated on page 21b of Tractate Shabbath:

What is [the reason for] Hanukkah? For our Rabbis taught: On the twenty-fifth of Kislev [commence] the days of Hanukkah, which are eight on which a lamentation for the dead and fasting are forbidden. For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils therein, and when the Hasmonean dynasty prevailed against and defeated them, they made search and found only one cruse of oil which lay with the seal of the High Priest, but which contained sufficient for one day's lighting only; yet a miracle was wrought therein and they lit [the lamp] therewith for eight days. The following year these [days] were appointed a Festival with [the recital of] Hallel and thanksgiving.

Hanukkah is therefore for us the miracle of a light richer than the energies feeding it, the miracle of 'more' from 'less,' the miracle of surpassing. The Hasmonean resistance is also this light detached from its material sources. But the talmudic text restores to a national war, a war defending a culture, the permanent horizon of marvel. **It is the daily marvel of the spirit that precedes culture. It is a flame that burns with its own fervor: the genius that invents the previously unheard-of, even though everything has already been said; the love that is inflamed even though the loved one is not perfect; the will that undertakes to do something despite the paralyzing obstacles in the way; the hope that lights up a life in the absence of reasons for hope; the patience that bears what can kill it.** It concerns the infinite resources of the spirit that, as a creator, surpasses the prudence of techniques; without calculation, without past, it joyfully pours forth its feelings in space, freely and prodigiously entering into the cause of the Other.

But the text I have just cited corrects this audacious wisdom with a further wisdom. Creation, freedom, permanent renewal. Does this revolutionary essence of the spirit tell us everything of its mystery? It blows where it will. But is every wind that blows in this way already a spirit, by virtue of this simple contempt for frontiers? Is to transgress already to surpass? Our own lights cannot burn in a simply gratuitous manner. **Before the miracle of generous light, and as a condition of this miracle, another miracle took place: a dark miracle that one forgets.** One forgets it in the blaze of lights triumphantly burning brighter. But if, in the Temple ravaged and profaned by the infidels, one had not found in a little flask of pure oil bearing the seal of the High Priest, which, ignored by everyone but unchanging, had remained there throughout the years while the candelabra remained empty, there would

⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press: 1997), 229-230.

have been no Hanukkah miracle. There had to be preserved somewhere a transparent oil kept intact.

Oh! Nocturnal existence turned in on itself within the narrow confines of a forgotten phial. Oh! existence sheltered from all uncertain contact with the outside, lethargic existence traversing duration, a liquid lying dormant on the edge of a life like a doctrine preserved in some lost yeshiva, a clandestine existence, isolated, in its subterranean refuge, from time and events, an eternal existence, a coded message addressed by one scholar to another, a derisory purity in a world given over to mixing! Oh! miracle of tradition, conditions and promise of a thought without restraint that does not want to remain an echo, or brief stir of the day.

Oh! generous light flooding the universe, you drink our subterranean life, our life that is eternal and equal to itself. You celebrate those admirable hours, which are dark and secret.

Some Questions:

- What does the miracle of Hanukkah mean to Levinas?
- How do you understand the “dark miracle that one forgets” as the condition for “the miracle of generous light?”
- Are there any “dark miracles” in your life that you tend to forget about, but that have enabled greater and more obvious triumphs or wonders?
- Levinas writes of “the daily marvel of the spirit that precedes culture.” What cultures nourish you, and what is the spirit that nourishes them?
- What differences and similarities do you see between this understanding of Hanukkah’s miracle and the approach described by the Kedushat Levi?

Some Comments:

Levinas offers us an interpretation of Hanukkah that is idiosyncratic in both its form and its content. Like much of his writing, parts of this teaching are somewhat obscure and elliptical: “Oh! Nocturnal existence turned in on itself.” But like poetry — and indeed, this brief essay is reminiscent of many mystical songs and poems by Leonard Cohen — Levinas here is using language against itself, gesturing through words towards what is beyond words. The occasional difficulty in understanding his meaning points us not towards meaninglessness but towards an excess of meaning, towards those spiritual truths that transcend the capabilities of language.

This is fitting for a text which describes the Hanukkah’s miracle as “the miracle of surpassing.” For Levinas, the lights of Hanukkah embody a divine light that cannot be constrained by any materiality, by any creative action, by any fuel. In this dark time of year, and in this dark time of history, may we all find ways to access a deeper and brighter light than we think we are capable of kindling.