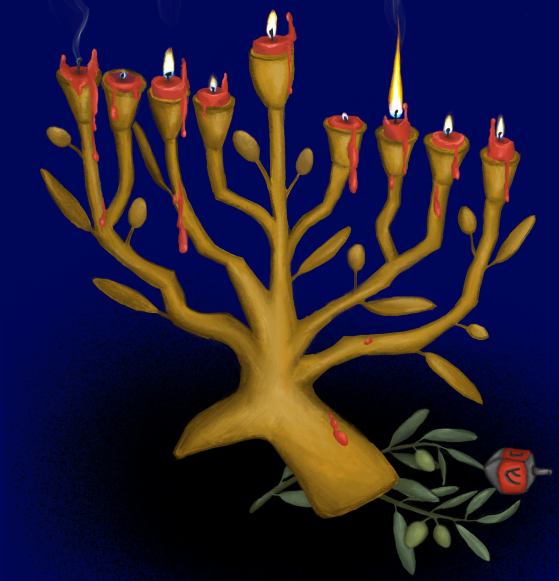
כי אֲרכה לָנו השעה



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כי אֵרכה לנו השעה

Time Lengthens For Us

A Chanukkah Reader
5785

Published by Halachic Left and All That's Left

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Introduction

Last year, Chanukkah was the first holiday we marked following October 7th and amidst the genocide in Gaza. There was a sense of dread leading up to it — how would this holiday, which Zionism had already so avidly seized as a celebration of militarism and Jewish chauvinism, be marked by a traumatized, vengeful community while Israel decimates Gaza?

We saw Jewish communities from across the political spectrum each mark the first holiday after October 7 in their own way. Horrifically, Chabad erected a menorah[1] amidst the bombed ruins in Gaza city. Far right activists attempted to hold a "Maccabi March" to assert control over the Temple Mount. Organizations around the globe raised money for the Israeli army with nightly candle lightings, turning a mitzvah into a ritual of uncritical nationalist commitment.

On the left, we rallied with Chanukkah for ceasefire events, blocking bridges and protesting the ongoing massacres. All That's Left produced a reader titled "Rededication," after the meaning of "Chanukkah" itself—*chanukat habayit*, rededication of the temple after it was profaned. There are so many holy things made rotten by this poisonous ethnonationalism, so much that needs to be sanctified—a year ago, we asked, "How do we rededicate, reconstruct a Torah and a lived Judaism that is liberatory and life-giving, not oppressive and death-wielding?"

This remains a vital question a year later, but also—it is a year later. A year ago, it felt impossible to imagine that this slaughter could continue much longer, at such horrific scale; but a year later, we mark Chanukkah while Israel continues to commit genocide in Gaza, and it feels like a brutally cyclical downward spiral. Sheikh Khaled Nabhan became widely known last year when, in November 2023, his granddaughter Reem was killed, and a video circulated of him kissing her eyelids, calling her "soul of my soul." Nabhan was killed on December 16, 2024, in a strike on the Nuseirat refugee camp.[2] Meanwhile, Israeli soldiers sing "Haneirot Halalu" and

1 Chabad Raises Large Menorah With IDF Soldiers in Gaza, Nov. 30, 2023, *COLive*

2 "'Soul of my soul': Israeli shelling kills Gaza grandfather who moved world," Dec. 16, 2024, *Al Jazeera*

write, "The festival of Chanukkah is almost here!" while setting Gazan homes on fire.[3]

The death and destruction are so immense it rends the heart trying to grasp them; the moral rot of this mindless, cruel militarism goes so deep. A line near the very end of Ma'oz Tzur feels awfully resonant:

כי ארכה לנו השעה ואין קיץ לימי הרעה

The time keeps lengthening for us, and there is no end to the terrible days.

In this moment, deliverance feels impossibly far; it's easy to feel like Adam HaRishon in the midrash before the winter solstice, watching the days continue to shorten and wondering if the world is drifting away with them.[4]

But the world is still here with us, however shattered. The line from Ma'oz Tzur, curiously, has two *girsaot*—one that reads שעה, hour/time, and another that reads ישועה, i.e.: the redemption is delayed. This verse holds two truths: it feels that there is no end to the terrible days; and the redemption is impossibly delayed, but existent. The opportunity for rededication and rebirth may feel far away—the hour long, and still lengthening—and it is, nonetheless, our obligation to strive towards it. Fred Moten, radical theorist and poet, writes: "I believe in the world and want to be in it. I want to be in it all the way to the end of it because I believe in another world and I want to be in that."

This time of horror stretches long; but the pieces in this reader offer some Torah on how to frankly assess the wreckage; how to be in this broken world; and how to envision that other world we wish to be in. There will be an end to the awful days, even if that end feels impossibly far. It is our job to hasten it.

3 X post from Younis Tirawi, Dec. 15, 2024
4 BT Avodah Zara 8a

Eight Little Lessons from a Pig in a Basket

by Yavni Bar-Yam

The sages of the Talmud did not choose to include any stories of the Maccabees' battles that we celebrate on Chanukkah. They did, however, record a story of a battle fought by the great-grandchildren of the Maccabees. I propose to draw eight lessons out of this story; one for each night of Channukah. Each lesson is relevant to how people think and talk about the state of Israel, and provide warnings against moral and logical fallacies in common rhetoric surrounding it.

The story appears three times in the Talmud: *Bava Kamma* 82b, *Sota* 49b, and *Menachot* 64b:

בבא קמא פב

תָּנוּ רַבָּנַן: כְּשֶׁצָּרוּ בֵּית חַשְׁמוֹנַאי זֶה עַל זֶה, הָיָה הוּרְקָנוֹס מִבִּפְנִים וַאֲרִיסְטוֹבּוּלוֹס מִבַּחוּץ. וּבְכָל יוֹם הָיוּ מְשַׁלְשְׁלִים לָהֶם בְּקוּפָּה דִּינָרִין, וְהָיוּ מַעֲלִים לָהֶם תְּמִידִים.

הָיָה שָׁם זָקֵן אֶחָד שֶׁהָיָה מַכִּיר בְּחָכְמַת יְוָונִית, אָמַר לָהֶם: כָּל זְמַן שֶׁעוֹסְקִין בָּעֲבוֹדָה – אֵין נִמְסָרִים בְּיֶדְכֶם. לְמָחָר שִׁלְּשְׁלוּ דִּינָרִין בְּקוּפָּה, וְהֶעֱלוּ לָהֶם חֲזִיר. כֵּיוָן שֶׁהִגִּיעַ לַחֲצִי הַחוֹמָה, נָעַץ צִפָּרְנָיו בַּחוֹמָה, וְנִזְדַּעְזְעָה אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת פַּרְסָה עַל אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת פַּרְסָה.

Bava Kamma 82b

Our sages taught: When the house of the Hasmoneans were besieging one another, Hyrcanus was on the inside and Aristobulus was on the outside. Every day, they would lower them down money in a basket, and they would raise them up daily offerings.

There was one elder there who knew Greek wisdom, who said to them: as long as they [those in the city] occupy themselves with the service, they are not delivered into your hands. The next day, they lowered them down money in a basket, and they raised them up a pig. When it got halfway up the wall, it stuck its hooves into the wall, and the land of Israel quaked four hundred parasangs by four hundred parasangs.

בְּאוֹתָהּ שָׁעָה אָמְרוּ: אָרוּר הָאִישׁ שֶׁיְּגַדֵּל חֲזִירִים. וְאָרוּר הָאָדָם שֶׁיְּלַמֵּד אֶת בְּנוֹ חָכְמַת יְוונִית.

At that time, they said: cursed is the man who grows pigs, and cursed is the person who teaches their son Greek wisdom.

וְעַל אוֹתָהּ שָׁעָה שָׁנִינוּ: מַעֲשֶׂה שֶׁבָּא עוֹמֶר מִגַּנּוֹת הַצְּרִיפִין. וּשְׁתֵּי הַלֶּחֶם מִבִּקְעַת עֵין סוֹכֵר.

And about that time, we have taught: it happened that the omer came from the Gardens of Tzerifin, and the two loaves from the valley of Ein Socher.

….|...i

Perhaps the most obvious lesson of this *baraita* is a warning against "Greek wisdom," which represents an alien threat to the Jewish approach to life and right behavior. What, specifically, is the Greek wisdom in this story? One straightforward answer seems to be that Greek wisdom is the Machiavellian attitude saying, "**Victory is what matters**." The elder learned in Greek wisdom gives advice that is only concerned with what strategic maneuver will defeat the supposed enemies. He does not lie; he asks the wrong question. He doesn't ask, "What is the right thing to do as human subjects of God?" Rather, he asks, "What is the way for *us* to defeat *them*?" By answering the second question without even a hint of concern towards the first, he perverts the process of decision making.

When Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu addressed a joint session of the United States Congress, he concluded by saying, "I came to assure you today of one thing: We will win!" Our *baraita* conveys not only an ambivalence about the possibility of meaningful "victory" through war, but also a certainty that asking only, "How do we achieve victory?" is an abandonment of our moral and religious commitments.

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Our *baraita* tells the story of a battle between two foes (who happen to be brothers). A question: Who are we rooting for in this battle? Aristobulus seems to be the villain, choosing to raise a pig for sacrifice, and thus

earning the censure represented by a great earthquake. But there is nothing particularly admirable about Hyrcanus. Within this narrative they read as indistinguishable Tweedledee/Tweedledum characters. In fact, when the story is retold in tractates *Menachot* and *Sotah*, it is Hyrcanus outside and Aristobulus inside—the opposite of what we read in *Bava Kamma*!

A potential lesson here is that not all stories have heroes. When we say things like, "People are critical of Israel, but they should be critical of Hamas instead," we are making a false dichotomy. Just because Hamas has done evil doesn't mean the army fighting them is righteous. There is a constant move among spokespeople for Israel to frame the IDF as fighting "terrorists," as if that magic word makes the IDF automatically righteous. The rhetorical move of trying to prove one's goodness by describing an opponent's evil is a falsehood: Two villains can fight one another, and they are still both villains.

….|.iii

Aristoblus and Hyrcanus don't sound like Hebrew or Aramaic names—they sound very Greek. As described in the Book of Maccabees, the Chanukkah rebellion was Jewish fighters against not only the Greek Selucid empire, but very much against Hellenizing Jews. Why do the great-grandchildren of those anti-Hellenization zealots have Greek names? Further, we know from other sources that after initial success, the Hasmoneans were quick to form alliances with the Hellenistic powers.

I am not about to enter into the question of whether the Maccabees are better thought of as Jewish nationalists or whether nationalism itself represents an assimilation into Western values à la Hellenization. Instead, I want to draw a somewhat more abstracted conclusion from this observation in our story.

The contemporary Israeli government and army identify themselves with the historical fight for survival of the tiny underdog nation, existentially threatened by surrounding hostile countries far stronger than they. Furthermore, they link the contemporary battles even farther back, with the perpetual hopes and sporadic attempts of the Jewish people to resettle in the holy land. Both of these evaluations—of the underdog status of

mid-20th century Israel, and of historical pining as a form of nationalism should be questioned (and are debates that I am not about to take up here). But even if those narratives are true or dear, we have no reason to assume that the current state of Israel and its government represent the same ethos as its ancient or recent predecessors, just as the Hasmonean dynasty very quickly changed their ethos from anti-Greek to Greek-named and following Greek wisdom, while still calling themselves the inheritors of the Hasmonean tradition and mission. Within a few generations, circumstances change, and principles get compromised.

….|iiii

The descriptions in the Books of Maccabees of the desecration of the Temple are horrific: unclean offerings, dedication to foreign gods, debauchery, murder.[1] But throughout it all, there is no earthquake. Four generations later, Jewish leaders raise a pig halfway up the wall on the outside of Jerusalem and there is an earthquake, which, if we take the Talmudic account literally, reached halfway to the Persian gulf, into Anatolia, and a ways across North Africa. I can imagine the rapid outraged response of the rhetorical defenders of the Hasmonean Dynasty, calling out the double standard: "There can be legitimate criticism of the Hasmoneans, BUT when they are the ONLY regime to be treated with an earthquake, the only thing we can call that is ANTISEMITISM." (God, the land of Israel, and the composers of the Talmud all seem to be antisemites, by certain current definitions.) Some people consistently respond to criticism of Israel or consequences for its actions with unconstructive whataboutism. But when we react that way, we are flailing against one of the most pervasive themes of Jewish tradition—the notion that the Jewish people, individually and collectively, have to answer for our transgressions.

In other words, when one does bad things, it is natural and appropriate that one gets a negative response, regardless of whether other people have done or are doing bad things in other parts of the world.

…i|iiii

1 "Selections from 1 & 2 Maccabees and Pesiqta Rabbati on the Desecration and Re-dedication of the Temple and the Rekindling of the Sacred" (opensiddur.org)

There are lots of unkosher animals, but pigs seem to get special attention. In this *sugya*, it is the presence of a pig, in particular, the *hooves* of the pig digging into the wall, that triggers the earthquake. There are two characteristics that make an animal kosher: On the outside, it must have split hooves, and on the inside, it must chew its cud. Pigs are the only animal to satisfy the external qualification, but not the internal one, so it looks kosher, but it isn't.[2] Several times in the *midrash*, the rabbis repeat a teaching that the pig "holds out its hooves and says, 'Look! I'm kosher!'"[3] In today's parlance, we might call this "hoofwashing."

Some defenders of Israel respond to reports of oppressive policies and war crimes with reminders of Israel's accomplishments. But that response is like the pig in the *midrash*: when someone says, "I don't think that animal is kosher, it doesn't chew its cud," they say, "Look! Split hooves! So kosher!"

This tactic finds a range of ways to express itself. I recall someone making a derisive comment about people criticizing Israel through messages on WhatsApp—"Don't they realize [said the person, not entirely accurately] that WhatsApp is an Israeli invention?!" Another tactic is responding to accusations of apartheid and discrimination by emphasizing the multiracial makeup of Israel, or its rights for queer citizens. There is also the line of reasoning that asks, "How can the IDF be committing atrocities when they are dropping warning leaflets, or providing aid to Gaza, or other seeming proof that the IDF doesn't intend to kill civilians? Otherwise they wouldn't take those measures." All of these talking points are ultimately the hooves of a pig. Regardless of any good deeds Israel has done, or neutral intentions of some of its operatives, if it commits war crimes, it is still guilty of committing war crimes.

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One surprising element of this *aggadah* is that the destructive character is identified as a "*zaken*"—an elder. This word is almost always used by the Talmud as an epithet of respect. In *Kiddushin* 32b, the sages ask if the commandment of respect for elders should include even an elder who is

2 See Leviticus 11:3-7 and commentaries there.

3 See Vayikra Rabbah 13:5, Midrash Tehillim 80:6, Genesis Rabbah 65:1, Kli Yakar on Leviticus 11:4, Nechama Leibowitz, *Iyunim al Vayikra*, on Shemini No. 8.

blameworthy. The sages conclude that the word *zaken* isn't for just anyone who is old, but specifically someone who is old and wise.

This offers a lesson for the elders in our community, who feel they have earned wisdom and respect through their life experience and their efforts maintaining the institutions of Jewish life. Perhaps they see, for example, younger Jewish college students or older but more peripheral members of the community, protesting for Palestinian freedom, with a certain condescension. These upstarts seem, at the very least, misguided and naive.[4] Perhaps they feel disrespected that people with less life experience than them are rejecting their opinions. But a rejection of their opinions does not mean that they are not wise and experienced, and it does not imply a lack of appreciation and respect. The *zaken* in this story was also wise—but his wisdom was faulty. His was a true statement, but it made the wrong assumptions, asked the wrong questions. There is a morality that reaches beyond individual human wisdom and experience, and a single lifetime's worth of experience is not sufficient to know God's truth.

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The conclusion of the story is a curse on those who raise pigs and those who teach their children Greek. Neither of those cursed figures appear in the story at all. The elder is the one who *was taught* Greek wisdom, not the one who taught his children. Aristobulus (or Hyrcanus) presumably bought the pig from someone who raised it, but we don't see that transaction. The curse is on earlier, root causes of the catastrophe, rather those we see before our eyes.

In response to calls for ceasefire, I have seen many times "There was a ceasefire on October 6," which is really to say, "They started it". But what was the situation really on October 6, and before? It was not a just peace. Even though the *zaken* and Aristobulus clearly are guilty, the rabbis do not curse them, but rather choose to look at root causes and to address systemic issues. Then they look forward and ask—how do we address those root problems? How do we repair the society that we now know to be broken?

4 See for example the sermon of Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9s3mWt5M-Yg

The coda of the story, appearing in the last bit of the *baraita*, teaches that in the year of Aristobulus and Hyrcanus' war the *omer* offering and the wheat for the two loaves of Shavuot needed to come from locations way out in the periphery, even though both of these offerings are ideally supposed to come from as close to Jerusalem as possible.

The Jewish people have built remarkable infrastructure for supporting the community's religious life, educational flourishing, social comfort, and political security. Ideally, we would all be looking to those central institutions for leadership in Torah and in moral clarity. But if and when a violent hunger for domination brings a blight on the sources of Torah that should be produced in the centers of our people, or bring ruin to the moral sensibilities surrounding its most important institutions, then, like the *omer* and the loaves, we will look to bring upright Torah from the fringes instead.

—

Yavni Bar-Yam learns and teaches Torah, writes, curates sources, and daydreams.

Miracles, Morality, and Militarism: Chanukkah in a Time of War

by Shaul Magid

The Jewish liturgical calendar has no conscience. It moves us through the year, leaving us to meditate on how festivals reflect, or deflect, the world we live in. Chanukkah approaches and the Gaza War, or shall we say, the Gaza destruction, churns on. One of the greatest dangers of protracted wars is that they become banal; we get used to them. Death and devastation become normal or normalized. The liturgical year distracts us, and we must put extra effort in connecting the Jewish year to the moment at hand.

Chanukkah is, on one reading, a holiday of military victory, but not a conventional one. It is the commemoration of an insurrection, a Hasmonean rebellion to retake the Temple from Greek domination. In the books of the Maccabees, the victory does not focus on land as much as the Temple, which is also how it is briefly described in the *Al Ha-Nisim* prayer. The rabbinic sages didn't like the Hasmoneans' militarism very much. They chose a subversion of Chanukkah by ignoring the Hasmonean rebellion and focusing on a story (with scant historical evidence) of the miracle of the oil that burned for eight days in the reconquered Temple. For much of Jewish history, military insurrection and the miracle of the oil existed as distinct, yet co-existing, notions of Chanukkah; though, in *Al Ha-Nisim* military victory and miracle are co-joined (a notion the Talmudic sages chose to ignore.)

With the rise of Zionism, the victory of the War of Independence (or the Arab-Israeli War) in 1948, and increasingly after the Six-Day War in 1967, the popular understanding of miracles shifted decidedly toward military victories, in a sense further toward the liturgy and away from the depiction of Chanukkah in Talmud Shabbat 21b. This subtle re-writing of Jewish history toward political nationalism was common fare in those days, as is argued by Yael Zerubavel in her 1997 book *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition*.

Below I offer a reading of these issues in the writings of R. Yoel Teitelbaum

of Satmar, whose book *Al Ha-Geulah ve al Ha-Temurah* was a response to the Six-Day War and in part a critique of the notion of "miracle" as it applies to wars more generally. He once quipped how surprised he was that so many secular Jews who didn't believe in G-d or miracles all of a sudden began using the word "miracle" to describe 1967. This reflects the comment by Israeli historian Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin's summary of secular Zionism: "G-d does not exist, but he promised us the land." In his description of wars more generally in *Al Ha-Geulah* Teitelbaum discusses war and the miracle of Chanukkah. Below I offer some reflections.

*

Teitelbaum was not a believer that miracles happen to just anyone. Rather, they are the provenance of the righteous, especially regarding collective miracles. To Teitelbaum, miracles are a divine response to human action. He brings an example of the idea that divine miracles only function for the righteous from the language of the *Al Ha-Nisim* liturgy that explicitly uses the term "miracle" as an explanation of the events in question, in particular the military victory during the Hasmonean revolt. Teitelbaum suggests, however, that the language of divine miracle is used here precisely because the liturgy states that the Hasmoneans "cleansed the Temple court and purified the altar." Questioning the language of the liturgy itself, he asks why it states that after the Hasmoneans won the war, they returned to the Temple to cleanse it of idolatry. This should have been assumed and doesn't add anything new to the narrative described in the prayer.

He claims, "This was all to support the completion of the miracle. That is, the 'miracle' was operational because of this righteous act. If they had not cleansed the Temple of idolatry all the [so-called] miracles that preceded this would have not been miraculous at all, and there would not have been 'a great salvation' (*teshuah gedolah*). And the miracle of the menorah lights would not have been miraculous. This is because G-d does not perform miracles for those who remain attached to idolatry. Rather, it was because they cleansed the Temple court and purified the altar from idolatry that the miracle [of Chanukkah] was fulfilled."[1]

Teitelbaum's point here is that miracles are judged in retrospect. In this case,

1 *Al Ha-Geluah ve al Ha-Temurah* (AG), 163. On Chanukkah and miracle, see also *Divrei Yoel*, vol. 6, 289.

the seeming act of divine intervention that may have laid the conditions for the Hasmoneans to rebel and re-capture the Temple could only be deemed miraculous after the Hasmoneans had proceeded to cleanse the Temple of idolatry: Miracles are always an interpretive retrospection of events conditioned on human behavior. If the victorious Hasmoneans had not cleansed the Temple of idolatry, they may have won in war, but it would not have been miraculous at all. Teitelbaum suggests that this is why the liturgy not only includes the great salvation of re-capturing Jerusalem but the very process of purification. It is precisely that purification process that instantiates the victory as a miracle.

It is not a stretch to connect Teitelbaum's reading of the Hasmonean victory to his response to the Six-Day War. While divine intervention of some sort may have contributed to the war, or so it seemed, its status as a divine miracle can only be applied after the fact, that is, after the war was won, dependent on how the victors behave. In his view, the state is transgressive; thus, the victory could *not* have been a miracle. Potential miracles thus enter a bracketed state once they appear until the results become clear. Military victory outside of righteous behavior can occur, but that is simply the natural byproduct of war; one side wins, the other side loses, without divine intervention at all. In such cases, military victory in no way illustrates divine favor.

On the question of war and miracles, Teitelbaum takes an interesting approach to Chanukkah, based on his reading of Nahmanides.

> We see from Nahmanides that victory in war, even in a case where a great majority, for example, the tribes of Israel were ten times more populous than the tribe of Benjamin, is not miraculous at all.[2] Quite the opposite, since G-d enabled natural events to unfold and removed divine providence [in the time of war], the weak majority fell to the strong minority. Therefore, it appears clear that such a victory is a natural occurrence. We can see from Gur Aryeh's (MaHaRal of Prague) reading in parshat Balak on the verse *because that people [Moab] was so numerous* (Num.

2 See Nahmanides to Genesis 19:8. This refers to a contrast Nahmanides makes between the Sodom story of the Pilegesh of Gibeah where the Benjaminites did not consent and entered into conflict with the other tribe, even as they were much smaller in number.

13:18)."[3] A multitude does not assure victory. Sometimes the majority cannot win if they are not suitable warriors.

This is also the case in the miracle of Chanukkah where "the few defeated the many and the weak defeated the strong." The sages did not establish the holiday on the military victory but only on the story of the miracle of the oil. And most authorities reject the position of the *Beit Yosef*[4] that the miracle [of the oil] was only seven days, and answer him in a variety of ways.[5] And the answer of the *Pri Hadash*[6] that the first day was a celebration of the military victory [and the other seven of the oil] is not convincing. On this, see *Pri Megadim*[7] who explains his words regarding the military victory, which was not miraculous. Thus, we bless the miracle of the oil which is only on the oil and not the war.[8]

The only Talmudic pericope about Chanukkah appears in Masechet Shabbat 21b and does not mention the military victory at all, but only a story about the oil burning eight days which did not appear in any previous literature of the Hasmonean rebellion. Much has been written about why the sages chose to ignore the military victory that was included in the earlier liturgy of *Al Ha-Nisim* of which they were likely aware.

Above, Teitelbaum gives his rendering of *Al Ha-Nisim*, arguing that the term "miracle" applied there only in relation to the Hasmoneans cleansing the Temple (relinquishing idolatry) after re-capturing it and not the military victory itself. Here he stays closer to the rabbinic pericope arguing that they only chose to brand the oil story miraculous and ignored

3 Gur Aryeh discusses at some length what constitutes strong and weak and the relationship between that and the land where those people dwell. He suggests that a multitude does not necessarily constitute military strength, and strength is not always in numbers. Rashi notes that strength or weakness is determined by whether they live in open or fortified cities. Gur Aryeh notes on Rashi that strength and weakness is determined by many other factors.

4 Joseph Karo's commentary to the *Tur Shulkhan Arukh*

5 That is, the first day the oil burned as it should and only the following seven did it burn when it should have already extinguished. Teitelbaum makes a similar argument about the miracle of Purim. See AG, 80, 81.

6 Hezekiah de Silva's super commentary to the *Shulkhan Arukh*

7 Joseph ben Meir Teomim's commentary to the *Shulkhan Arukh*

8 AG, 34.

the war altogether not because, as some claimed, the rabbinic sages were not supportive of the Hasmoneans who quickly Hellenized Jerusalem, but because the military victory did not merit being called a miracle.[9]

Teitelbaum suggests a few things. First, that the extraordinary, especially in cases of war, does not necessarily constitute the miraculous. Second, that miracles are acts of divine intervention only in response to human behavior. And third, that miraculous phenomena can, in fact, sometimes happen to the wicked but those are the product of satanic forces given sanction to test the righteous. In short, at best one can only be agnostic about miracles and thus should not deploy it as a justification for any turn of events, and specifically not for the extraordinary victory of Israel in 1967.

On another level, Teitelbaum understands crying "miracle!" as dangerous because it establishes a sense of certainty that is neither provable nor falsifiable. Teitelbaum's entire worldview is founded on fear and doubt as the operative categories of living on the precipice of the end-time. For example, he writes, "I remain fearful, for who knows what the new day will bring? I hope that it will not come to pass and that we will not be tested from heaven with these great tests because our weak generation has no strength to endure them. But a person does not know what tests will come upon us in these days of *ikvata d'meshikha*."[10]

We are presently in another kind of war. Not a war of insurrection (the Hasmoneans) but a war that is responding to an insurrection. Israel's justification for the war, even after the utter devastation of Gaza and the deaths of tens of thousands of civilians, women, and children, is that this is a defensive war. Teitelbaum was not a pacifist; he readily acknowledged that wars were sometimes necessary, albeit he argued Jews were forbidden to wage war which is why he was opposed to a Jewish state, as states by definition are arbiters of war. But even given that, how one engages in such a war, whether vengeance usurps self-defense, whether life on our side is deemed categorically different from life on the other side, whether a just

9 In AG 34, 35 he offers another reading of *Al Ha-Nisim* to suggest that, in fact, it may have been a bit of a miracle because this was a case where Satan was particularly active to destroy the possibility of purifying the Temple and thus divine intervention was needed in this case to assure victory. That is why, he claims, the liturgy includes "the pure defeated the defiled" which he claims is somewhat superfluous without an explanation.

10 AG, 138.

war becomes unjust because retribution trumps legitimate goals, even the release of hostages, is another matter. For Teitelbaum, the Hasmonean victory was only a miracle, and in that case, a "just war," after they cleansed the Temple of idolatry. In such a theological register, when righteousness became a convenience, when morality is viewed as impractical and even naïve, when the standard is not how we *should* act, but how others act, we exit the orbit of the miraculous, and become, "like all the nations," but not in a good way.

"A light unto the nations" or "a nation that dwells alone"? The first is destiny, the second is tragedy. Chanukkah is as much a celebration as a warning. Let its light shine through the darkness of our moral test. And may we succeed.

—

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Chanukkah and Churban: A Path Towards Hope

by Rabbi Aryeh Cohen

There are two extrabiblical, mythohistorical events that the Rabbis discuss in the Babylonian Talmud, the Bavli. The destruction of the Temple (Tisha b'Av) and its rededication (Canukkah). They are almost diametrically opposite—Tisha b'Av commemorates the defeat and destruction, which in the rabbinic imaginary prefigures all other defeats and destructions, while Chanukkah commemorates a military victory and a major miracle. Much ink has been spilled on each of these commemorations separately, but I want to compare the way they are treated in the Bavli.

The collection of legends of the *churban* (the destruction of the Temple) lays like a ragged scar of self-flagellation, failed strategies, attempted resistances, weak justifications, and posthumous, though unlikely victories, across several pages of Bavli Gittin (55b-59a). In contrast, the folios (Bavli Shabbat 22a-23b) dedicated to Chanukkah wend along the well-trod path of halakhic debate with only a single paragraph of acknowledgment of the reason for the holiday. Once the Bavli makes the connection between the Mishnah's law of the *siqariqon* (land which has been stolen by occupying forces), and the destruction of the Temple, the narration of doom assumes gale force. Beginning with the well-known narrative of guilt—Qamtza and bar Qamtza—the action moves to Nero and Nebuchadnezzar. The text proceeds from individual starvation to rivers of blood, from a small mountain that was home to six hundred thousand cities, to the destruction of the priests as an offering of guilt by Vespasian himself; the blood, the screams, the futile attempts at armed resistance, the minor insults that led to major catastrophes, the individual humiliations mirrored in the national humiliation.

The experience of reading through this collection of *aggadot* is immersive —there is something very physical, very material about the repetitive defeats— the bodies pierced by sword and ravaged by hunger. Even the moments of light—the large ones as when God defeats Titus in a

theomachy on land, sea, and land again, deploying the smallest of creatures to humiliate the greatest of tyrants; the smaller points as when Aquilles converts to Judaism, or Jesus has a cameo from hell—are all actually post facto minor victories in a whole field of humiliations.

On the other hand, the connection of the Chanukkah *sugya* to the Mishnah is more straightforward, as the point of Mishnah Shabbat 2 is candle lighting and the appropriateness of various wicks and oils.[1] The path that the Bavli follows is not a narrative one, however. The issues that surround the one short famous description of Canukkah from *Megillat Ta'anit* are as follows: the timing of candle lighting; whether the obligation is on the individual or the household; where the lamps are placed; can the candles be used for anything other than just being candles; how many blessings one says; is the obligation fulfilled by lighting the lamps or placing them in an appropriate location; and what are the blessings.

In the middle of this more or less generic rabbinic discussion, the *stam*, the anonymous voice of the Talmud asks: "What is Chanukkah?" and answers by quoting the famous description from *Megillat Ta'anit*:

> *When the 'Greeks' entered the sanctuary they made all the oils in the sanctuary impure. When the kingdom of the House of the Hasmoneans overpowered them and defeated them, they checked and only found one cruse of oil with the seal of the High Priest, and it only had enough oil to light for a single day. A miracle occurred and they lit [the candelabra] from it for eight days.*

שֶׁכְּשֶׁנִּכְנְסוּ יְוָונִים לַהֵיכָל טִמְּאוּ כָּל הַשְּׁמָנִים שֶׁבַּהֵיכָל. וּכְשֶׁגָּבְרָה מַלְכוּת בֵּית חַשְׁמוֹנַאי וְנִצְחוּם, בָּדְקוּ וְלֹא מָצְאוּ אֶלָּא פַּךְ אֶחָד שֶׁל שֶׁמֶן שֶׁהָיָה מוּנָּח בְּחוֹתָמוֹ שֶׁל כֹּהֵן גָּדוֹל, וְלֹא הָיָה בּוֹ אֶלָּא לְהַדְלִיק יוֹם אֶחָד. נַעֲשָׂה בּוֹ נֵס וְהִדְלִיקוּ מִמֶּנּוּ שְׁמוֹנָה יָמִים.

The Talmud immediately follows this description with a discussion of the relative liability of a store owner and a camel driver in a case in which the flax that the camel is carrying catches fire from the lamp of a store owner. If the lamp is inside the store, the camel driver is accountable for the damages of the fire; if the lamp is outside the store, the store owner is responsible. Here Rabbi Yehudah interjects that if we are speaking of a

1 I am going to use both the anachronistic (but popular) translation "candle" and the more accurate (but archaic sounding) "lamp" as translations of *ner*.

Chanukkah lamp, the store owner is *not* liable. In other words, we return to the quotidian and do not linger on the heroic or miraculous.

Why is this?

The legends of the *churban* are a rabbinic attempt at magical realism to describe the indescribable. To put words to an event that left a scabrous wound in the psyche of the Jewish people. The only way to get at that was through a series of tales, intimate and national, which illustrated what humiliation, defeat, destruction, ethnocide, looked and felt like. With the events of Chanukkah, the Talmudic writers—the attributed Sages and the *stammaitic* compilers—are going in the opposite direction; they are urbanizing and thereby domesticating the experience. Rather than tell tales of martial prowess and superhuman courage, the Talmudic discourse is about the way the commemoration and celebration shows up in the polis in a quotidian way: The lamps must be at the doorway outside. If there are two gates, one must light at both of them. The time for and the duration of the lighting is tracked by the marketplace and the traders. A person who has only *seen* the lamp but has not lit a lamp themselves, must still recite one blessing, the blessing "Who has made miracles for our ancestors in those days in this time." שעשה ניסים לאבותינו בימים ההם בזמן הזה. While the miracle may be a sign of Divine intervention, the act which marks that miracle is rather a rabbinic invention. As the *stam* asks about the seemingly impertinent use of וצונו, "who has *commanded* us": where were we commanded? The answer is that the Sages decided that God commanded us. The entire feeling of the commemoration is one of setting the miraculous in the everyday.

When we demand that the miraculous live in our cities, shining light on the *realities* of life rather than living in the dream of a redeemed place and time, we yoke our hopes to our obligations to repair those very real cities, with their very real challenges—houselessness, poverty, hunger, racism, Islamophobia, antisemitism, state violence, and on and on.

I will give the last words to an edited "quote" of Emmanuel Levinas, edited possibly against his intention (and definitely out of its context). Chanukkah "…teaches us that the longing for Zion, … [should] not [be]

one more nationalism or particularism; nor … a simple search for a place of refuge. It [must be] the hope [for] a society, which is wholly human. And this hope [must] be [grounded] in Jerusalem, in the earthly Jerusalem, and not outside all places, in pious thoughts."[2]

—

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2 Emmanuel Levinas, "Cities of Refuge," in *Beyond the Verse*.

What is Chanukkah?

by Anonymous

Growing up, the most common divrei Torah I heard around Hanukkah and Purim centered on comparing between the two festivals. This cliché often bored and disinterested me. However, when understanding what motivates those who support Israeli actions in Gaza, and what motivates others to oppose it, understanding the difference between Purim and Hanukkah is paramount.

The typical dvar Torah follows the comparison as laid out by the *Mishneh Beruruah* in the name of the Levush, Rav Mordechai Yoffe. On Purim, Haman sought to destroy the Jews physically by wiping them out entirely, but on Chanukkah, Antiochus wished to weaken the Jewish spirit, to spread the moral rot of Hellenism throughout the minds of the Jewish people.[1] The Jews in each story respond to the danger accordingly. In the Purim story, all the Jews rally around Esther in an attempt to stop Haman. In the Chanukkah story, Jews of conscience choose to separate themselves from Jews infected by the moral rot, even coming into open conflict with them, in order to truly confront the problem of Hellenism.

The mantra of warmongers in Israel has been "Yachad NeNatzeach" ("Together We Will Win.") It is a rallying cry that demands Jews of conscience bury their concerns in order for the broader Jewish collective to unite around the singular goal of the war effort—first in Gaza, now in Lebanon and Syria. Such action makes sense in the face of a Purim-style threat, which is how the Nationalists understand the current situation. It is common to hear Jewish nationalists claim that "Arabs want to kill all the Jews," so we must "kill them, before they kill us."

For us Jews of conscience who oppose the ongoing genocide, the situation is akin to that of Chanukkah. A perverse ideology has spread throughout the Jewish world. Namely, a settler-nationalist ideology has taken over the Jewish world, causing people to justify ongoing horrific war crimes and an

1 *Mishneh Berurah* 670:6

internationally sanctioned ethnic cleansing. This ideology causes all Jews tremendous harm, including the horrific retaliatory violence of October 7th. People of conscience know that this ideology needs to be fought, be it amongst the other nations of the world or amongst Jews themselves.

None of this is to say that the appropriate course of action is for us to take up arms against the Hellenizers as the Maccabees did. As the famous Chabad rabbi, Rav Avraham Yehuda Khein, writes, the book of Maccabees is not included in the canon specifically because its 'iron and blood' approach is in stark contrast to Jewish ethics.[2] Similarly, the obligations of Chanukkah do not commemorate any military aspect of the Maccabean campaign, rather memorialize the powerful action of the rededication of the Temple. Such an act had little to no military value, but it sent a powerful statement to the entire world: the menorah, which the First Chief Rabbi of Palestine, Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook, says symbolises universal enlightenment and peaceful ritual engagement,[3] prevails. The benightedness of Hellenistic military barbarism is doomed to fail.

That our canon exclusively celebrates the rededication act and actively excluding the military campaign tells us where to focus our efforts while fighting the ethno-nationalist Hellenists of today. In the opening pages of *Bikkurei Yehuda*, Rav Yehuda Leib Don Yahiya of the Mizrahi movement explains the gemara in Shabbat 77b, "The dread of the *mafgiyah* over the lion." Rashi explains that the *mafgiyah* is a small animal with a loud voice. Rav Don Yahiya expands on this, explaining that just as the *mafgiyah* can instill fear into the mighty and violent lion with its powerful voice, the Jewish ability to challenge injustice in the world cannot be achieved through violence, but rather through protest. Rav Elazar Shach, the eminent leader of 20th-century Litvish Jewry, has said that when Yitzchak tells his son, "The voice is the voice of Yaakov, yet the hands are the hands of Eisav." (Genesis 27:22) Yitzchak is saying that whilst the nations of the world may wish to exert influence through physical might—in the manner that the Israeli military does today—Yaakov's might is not in physical might, G-d forbid. It is in his spiritual prowess: the ability to use his voice.

In one of his commentaries on the *Zohar*, the Vilna Gaon notes that every major event in Jewish history repeats on a constant cycle for every

2 *BeMalchut HaYahadut*, *Volume 2*, p. 164
3 *Midbar Shur,* 6

generation, repackaged for the times.[4] Our generation faces a contemporary version of the Chanukkah struggle. We must fight valiantly in this battle. Not with the tools of Eisav as the Maccabees did, but with the authentic tools of Yaakov: our voices, our writing, our words of Torah.

In a Jewish world filled with Jewish ethno-nationalist Hellenists, this is not a pleasant or easy battle. Former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom Rav Immanuel Jakobovits writes in his book *The Timely and the Timeless*:

> *As heirs to the Hebrew Prophets and like them, we must be prepared to expose ourselves to the risk of loneliness, unpopularity and sometimes even derision. They, too, were often ignored and harassed by their contemporaries. Yet their work has remained immortal, and thanks to their reproof and consolation, we are alive whilst others have disappeared.*[5]

Our spiritual DNA is infused with the ability to not only fight this battle, but to win. I have every faith that we shall be successful.

4 Beur HaGra on *Sifra DeTzniuta* 5

5 Jakobovits, Immanuel; *The Timely and the Timeless: Jews, Judaism and Society in a Storm-Tossed Decade*

"For One Has Nothing Else"
On Defeat, Faith, and Commitment

by Aron Wander

> *"Who's your master? Where are you going? And whose [animals] are these ahead of you?"* (Genesis 32:18).

When Jacob sends a servant with gifts to his brother Esau in parshat VaYishlach, read just before Chanukkah, these are the questions he predicts Esau will ask.

Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Rotenberg-Alter, the Hasidic master known as the Chiddushei Ha-Rim, connects three questions to those asked in Pirkei Avot: "Where did you come from? Where are you going? And before Whom must you give an accounting?"[1] The similarity between the two, he teaches, "is because wicked Esau, too, asks these three things of a person in order to bring them to a great depression such that they take no action."[2]

There are painful, existential questions that we must ask ourselves, the Chiddushei Ha-Rim insists. Where are we going? What are we working for and towards? But the way in which we ask ourselves those questions matter. Pirkei Avot, according to the Chiddushei Ha-Rim, encourages us to engage in self-reflection as a goad to action. But the voice of Esau within each of us asks us those questions in order to lead us to despair.

Where are we going? I have thought these past weeks of the haunting words of Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, the 16th-century Kabbalist:

> *With the destruction of the Second Temple, darkness covered the entire world. And from then until today, the world and the* Shechinah *[G-d's exiled presence] have descended into the realm of the* kelippot *[forces of evil]…*

1 M. Avot 3:1.

2 Yitzchak Meir Rotenberg-Alter, *Sefer Ha-Zechut*, Likutim: VaYishlach. Commenting on the interpretation, Martin Buber writes, "There is a demonic question, a spurious question, which apes G-d's question, the question of Truth. Its characteristic is that it does not stop at 'Where art thou?', but continues: 'From where you have got to, there is no way out.'" Martin Buber, *The Way of Man* (Secaucus: The Citadel Press, 1966), 13-14.

There is no day that is not worse than the one that preceded it.[3]

For Rabbi Cordovero, history is an unending nightmare: Each day brings a new catastrophe, and redemption will only come at the end of our nearly endless fall off of a jagged cliff. In the meantime, we are powerless to do anything. "[The *Shechinah*] is always falling," he bemoans, "and redemption is contingent upon her descent."[4]

His description of the *Shechinah*'s constant fall sounds all too real: the brutal massacres of October 7th, and then nearly 14 months of unending carnage in Gaza and ethnic cleansing in the West Bank; the siege of northern Gaza, with reoccupation and settlements on the way; Hezbollah's barrages into Israel, and then the massive bombing and invasion of southern Lebanon; in the U.S., Trump's victory, with the prospect of military roundups of immigrants, the decimation of our already feeble healthcare system, the further erosion of abortion rights and unions, and the destruction of the climate. Of course, the *Shechinah*'s fall didn't begin on October 7th: the events of this past year are merely the most recent wreckage. But if we hadn't noticed the abyss yawning beneath our feet before, we can now see nothing else.

Where are we going? The voice of Esau, the voice of despair, would answer, "As far down as we can go." The defeats often feel irreversible, the defeats to come inevitable.

There has been a glut of grief this past year: most obviously and most intensely, the grief of those whose parents, children, friends, acquaintances, teachers, playmates, lovers, and neighbors have been slaughtered. There is the vicarious, strange grief of those of us without loved ones killed who have seen thousands of their faces on billboards, in videos, in pictures, again and again. There is the grim, numbing grief of seeing such massive violence and expecting much more.

But there is also a more ambiguous grief. In her essay "Resisting Left Melancholy," Wendy Brown writes of the defeats the global Left had

3 Moshe Cordovero, *Or Yakar* vol. 15, 84, quoted in Haviva Pedaya, *Halicha She-Me'ever Le-Trauma* (Tel-Aviv: Reisling, 2011), 213. I first found this passage in Tomer Persico's review of the book. See Tomer Persico, "Haviva Pedaya al Nitzhonah shel Kabbalat Ha-Ari."

4 *Ibid.*

suffered by the late '90s: the disintegration of socialism, the labor movement, and a sense of international solidarity. Beyond despair over the defeats themselves, she points to another sort of lament:

> *[I]n the hollow core of all these losses, perhaps in the place of our political unconscious, is there also an unavowed loss — the promise that Left analysis and Left commitment would supply its adherents with a clear and certain path towards the good, the right, and the true?* [5]

For Brown, alongside the grief of real, material losses and their horrifying consequences lies the grief of shattered ideals: the fantasy that if we came up with the proper theories and fought with all of our strength, the moral arc of the universe might bend the way it's supposed to.

If you had said to me on October 6th that conditions in Gaza were near a breaking point and that Hamas would eventually break out in a murderous rampage, I'd have believed you. If you'd told me that Israel would respond with unrelenting carnage for a year, killing and wounding tens of thousands of civilians, I'd also have believed you. And if you'd added that the organized Jewish community would line up uncritically behind the war, even as right-wing Israeli ministers began to speak out about ethnic cleansing in Gaza, I think I'd have believed you. I'd have believed you if you'd told me Trump would win, promising more carnage in Israel/Palestine and the U.S. And I'd have believed you if you'd told me that our efforts to stop any of this would largely fail.

And yet, now that all of that has happened—none of it beyond belief, all of it predictable—I know that I, too, am grieving some fantasy I didn't realize I'd still been clinging to. For all that I have known on an intellectual level that the lives our children inherit may well be more brutal and violent than our own, that we will hand them a burning and shattered world, part of me didn't really believe it was possible. For all that I'd known that our own beleaguered activism might not even make a dent in the relentless onslaught of fascism in Israel/Palestine and the U.S., I still must have believed on a deeper, unconscious level that if we fought hard enough, we'd be sure to win. I'm not even sure I could tell you exactly what the fantasy was that I believed in that has now been shattered, but perhaps that's what makes the melancholy all the more difficult to escape.

5 Wendy Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholy," *boundary* 2 no. 26, vol. 3 (1999): 22.

Rabbi Cordovero's own melancholic theology of catastrophe was forged in trauma. In the aftermath of the expulsion from Spain, Cordovero gave voice, as the scholar of mysticism Haviva Pedaya writes, "to the apocalyptic experience… [and to] a conception of history as deterioration appropriate to the feeling of destruction and the traumatic present still full of ruin."[6] In the wake of the destruction of our world and our fantasies about it, it is all too tempting to conclude that the apocalypse is destined to continue. But as much as this seems like cold-blooded realism, it too is a sort of fantasy: if the world is sure to continue crumbling, we can protect ourselves from being disappointed again lest our efforts to fight fail once more.

It's true that Cordovero preserves a modicum of optimism—when the Shechinah completes her tragic fall, the world will immediately be redeemed. Perhaps this is not so fundamentally different from those who insist that "things have to get worse before they get better," or that "it's always darkest just before dawn," though Cordovero's formulation is more extreme. This sort of "hope," though, is actually an even deeper expression of despair: it claims that all we can do in the interim is watch – or even pray for—the collapse. Neither Cordovero's insistent pessimism nor his illusory optimism offer a path forward.

I spent many days these past two years in the South Hebron Hills of the West Bank. The Palestinian villages there—Susiya, Umm Al-Kheir, Um Durit, and dozens of others—are being driven off their land by soldiers under the pretext of bureaucratic policies and by settlers with naked brutality. Cordovero's falling *Shechinah* is an apt description of the reality on the ground: each day brings a new demolition, settler attack, arbitrary arrest, or cut water pipe. For the Palestinian activists, the villages, and the Israeli and international activists fighting in solidarity with them, there is little hope that things will get better. In fact, everyone is clear they will almost certainly continue to get worse. The villagers are fighting to stay on their land for another decade, another five years, another few months, all with the knowledge that they are facing nearly insurmountable odds: a few thousand people and a handful of activists against an entire state apparatus.

"Where is any of this going?" asks Esau. Why continue fighting a losing battle?

6 Pedaya, 213.

There is only one answer to Esau's questions, insists the Chiddushei Ha-Rim. "Even in the lowest depths," he contends, "one must not let go of G-d, for one has nothing else."[7] What does it mean not to let go of G-d? Isn't a belief in G-d simply the fantasy that we don't have to despair because some-One will sort things out for us? The Chiddushei Ha-Rim notes the answer Jacob instructs his servant to offer Esau regarding the animals: "They are a gift" (Gen. 32:19). For the Chiddushei Ha-Rim, this response to Esau's question is not simply a factual description but rather symbolizes an existential stance. The "gift" with which one must respond to Esau's questions is our very lives. "[It is] as if one were sacrificing one's soul for G-d,"[8] he writes.

The only way not to let go of G-d, he seems to be arguing, is to be prepared to sacrifice for what one believes. There is no logical answer to Esau's questions. As tempting as it is to seek solace in external circumstances, in a wan optimism that things will turn out for the best, we will almost certainly be disappointed if we stake our hopes there. All we can draw courage and strength from, at the end of the day, is what we believe in: the values and world we are struggling for. The fact that we have no guarantee that such a world is possible makes it no less worth the fight. The only way to ensure its impossibility is to forfeit it preemptively.

This was the sort of hope I saw each day in the West Bank, among the Palestinian villagers and activists, and among the Israelis and internationals who fought with them: not a hope in salvation, not a hope in the moral arc of the universe, but a hope that expressed the hard and bitter determination to struggle for justice, even at great personal cost. They had been arrested, beaten, and threatened. Some of them had even been killed. But they insisted, as the Chiddushei Ha-Rim did, that "one must not let go."

It is telling that the Chiddushei Ha-Rim jumps from noting the similarity between Esau's questions and those of Pirkei Avot to answering Esau's questions. Why answer Esau's questions if they are designed to lead us to despair? Is this not the exact sort of question the Chiddushei Ha-Rim warned us against engaging with? Should we not ignore Esau and turn back to Pirkei Avot?

It may be that the Chiddushei Ha-Rim is hinting, intentionally or not, at

7 Rotenberg-Alter.
8 Ibid.

a more paradoxical truth. Pirkei Avot's insistence on only asking questions in a way that will prompt us to action might lead us to repress our most existential doubts. If we give voice to them, after all, will we still have the strength to continue? But so long as we frame our questions in a way that sidesteps our greatest fears, we may be tempted to offer trite responses: to affirm that our faith has not been shaken and that our courage has not faltered. Maybe, though, it is *only* when we allow Esau to ask those questions that we can respond with our most unwavering commitment. Only when we confront the fullness of our despair, when our tentative and trite solutions our swept away by the relentless battering of "Where are you going," "Where are you going," "*Where are you going*," questions with no obvious answer, can we learn what it is that we refuse to surrender.

Why is VaYishlach read before Chanukkah? Perhaps what it teaches is how to confront the darkness after the holiday. For eight nights, we add one more candle to the left side of the chanukiah and then light from the left to the right. In Kabbalah, the "left side" is the domain of judgment and violence, and it is the aspect of G-d from which the forces of evil and domination emerge. Each night of Chanukkah, as we add a new candle, we simulate the growing power of those forces, only for the light to achieve an even greater victory than the night before. On the final night of Chanukkah, when a full eight candles have been lined up to the left, light makes its greatest conquest. Then, though, the holiday ends and an even greater darkness descends without any guarantee of renewed light. The fantasy of inevitable victory is shattered and defeat looks certain. That's when the real fight begins.

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Reactive vs. Adaptive Leadership:
Challenging the Militaristic Paradigms of Chanukkah and Nakh

by Emuna Keswick

Alongside the popular tropes of light and delicious fried food, militaristic glory is a key and often-overlooked theme of Chanukkah. A Greek officer's attempt at subjugating the Jewish people is stopped short when he attempts to force the priest Matisayhu to participate in an act of *avodah zarah*, idol worship. Rather than submitting, Matisyahu slays the officer and a Jewish collaborator and a decades-long revolution ensues that eventually sees Jerusalem back under Jewish auspices and the *Beis Hamikdash* re-sanctified. This is the story of Chanukkah, as found in the apocryphal Books of the Maccabees.

In a time when Jews were forced to give up their customs—required to violate Shabbos, prevented from doing *bris milah*—and the *Beis Hamikdash* was desecrated, one man refused the Hellenization-or-death being imposed upon them. It doesn't take much stretching of the imagination to understand what is so compelling about the narrative: We feel victorious when we watch brave individuals choose the ultimate sacrifice as they strive towards a common goal for the greater good. It's what makes the war film industry so successful. Stories like these give the audience someone and something to root for. In these tales, the impossible can be made possible and good can overcome evil.

In actuality, though, war itself is not the glorified, romanticized endeavor that these narratives paint. The testimonies and daily images coming out of Gaza are only the most recent reminder of how truly horrifying war is. In the fight of good versus evil, war itself is the evil.

The story of the Maccabees and its militarism is not an aberration in our tradition; the Tanakh itself is littered with the glorification of war and military leaders. In *BaMidbar* 27:15-17, when Moshe Rabbeinu—our beloved paradigmatic leader—asks Hashem to appoint his replacement, he lays out specifications for what he believes *B'nei Yisrael* needs: a leader that will "go out before them and come in before them, and who shall take

them out and bring them in, so that Hashem's community may not be like sheep that have no shepherd." The very paradigm that establishes Jewish leadership is one that focuses on war. When we consider the leaders our texts and *mesorah* celebrate, a startlingly violent picture begins to form. It begs the question: How does one become an anti-war Jewish leader in light of the emphasis that the Torah places on militaristic leadership?

The first step is recognizing the way this paradigm no longer serves us. Even if the primary construct of leadership we get from Tanakh and texts like Maccabees is one of military leadership, those aren't necessarily meant to serve as functional paradigms for eternity—different historical and material circumstances require different responses. The whole rabbinic tradition is premised on an acknowledgment that the models found in Tanakh are not always those most suited to our current reality. Furthermore, even within the Chanukkah story and Tanakh, we see that those leaders were ultimately unsuccessful at establishing a peaceful and flourishing society. The Hasmoneans became a Hellenized client state of the Seleucid Empire and slaughtered their opponents, including the rabbis. *Sefer Shoftim* tells the same tale of failure repeatedly: it begins with the death of Yehoshua, the praised military leader sent to fulfill Moshe's request; immediately *B'nei Yisrael* strays from the Torah, is attacked by the enemy, and when all hope seems lost they are saved by a new militaristic leader. Then the *shofet* would die and the cycle would happen all over again. If this paradigm of leadership was meant to be the perfect, eternal structure, then there certainly would have been a stop to the incessant cycle of sin and violence.

Today we are caught in a similar loop of destruction and chaos. Even if the Israeli army were to play the role of proverbial shofet and secure what they consider a victory for Jewish safety, it would not be a step towards breaking the cycle; it would only worsen it. Today's violence differs from the violence *B'nei Yisrael* displayed in *Sefer Shoftim* in two distinct ways. Firstly, rather than the majority of violence being inflicted upon us, it is members of *B'nei Yisrael* actively committing war crimes upon Palestinians. We have the upper hand in the current dynamic, and have for nearly a century. Secondly, our leaders are not only pursuing war for its own sake, or the sake of triumph; they're pursuing revenge.

Moshe was forbidden to enter the land with *B'nei Yisrael*, and his sin was the very one we are committing en masse currently: his grief and anger

turned him away from God and toward an act of revenge. After the death of his sister Miriam in the desert, Moshe is mourning. *B'nei Yisrael* run out of water and they swarm him and Aharon, crying out in bitter complaint as they have so many times the past forty years. When, overcome and overrun, the brothers flee to ask for Hashem's guidance, God meets their request for help with compassion and provides clear instructions: they are to speak to a rock and coax out water. However, when the time comes for Moshe to bring forth the water his reaction comes straight from his anger, his grief, and his frustration. He antagonizes *B'nei Yisrael*, calling them "rebels," and rather than speaking to the rock as Hashem instructed, he strikes it with his staff. Rambam posits that in striking the rock, Moshe publicly acts from a place of anger, revealing a "weakness in his soul." It is for this act of revenge and instinctive destruction that Moshe is destined to never reach *Eretz Yisrael*.

In modern language, one might discern the two possibilities as reacting—what Moshe did—versus responding—what Moshe should have done. When we act from a place of anger, from a place of revenge, we do a disservice to God. A reaction is something instinctive; it is understandable, but not necessarily right. It is an all too common experience of mine to hear rabbis and Jewish educators speak from a reactionary place, especially following the events of October 2023. Suddenly, people who I once looked to for guidance and wisdom are spewing vitriol and hatred towards Palestinians and Muslims alike, encouraging widespread destruction in Gaza and cheering on the soldiers and government responsible for it. This is the knee-jerk response that comes from wide-spread fear mongering; a position of extreme defensiveness combined with deep dehumanization.

Today's leaders are both mimicking the militarism of those earlier paradigms and what was *davka* Moshe's worst trait: reactivity and revenge rather than thoughtful and intentional forward-looking response.

By seeing what *hasn't* worked, what clearly only causes damage and destruction, we can think about what models of leadership produce a different and better reality, and should be actively working to model and create those. What we need is an "adaptive leader," as Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks posits:

> *Adaptive leadership is called for when the world is changing, circumstances are no longer what they were, and what once worked works no more. There is no*

quick fix for such things, no miracle pill, no simple following of instructions. We have to change. What's more, the leader cannot do this for us. He must inspire, but we have to follow through.[1]

Jewish leadership was never intended to be the violent, militaristic role we find all too often today. When Zionism uplifts leaders like the Maccabees as an eternal paradigm, it perpetuates a dark and damaging vision of what behavior to emulate. Leaders who at best blindly support violent revenge and at worst actively pursue it are continuing to distance us as a people from Hashem. Instead, we need leaders who openly acknowledge the full horror of this ongoing slaughter and our communal responsibilities. We need leaders who, rather than simply reacting from our long history of trauma, instead choose to be deliberate in how they respond to the concerns of their community. We need leaders who see the plight of the Palestinians and the role we play in that and we need leaders who can respond to the growing number of Jews who wish to change that reality.

Many communities want to make anti-war Jews out to be fringe individuals (they aren't) who are leading to the destruction of the Jewish people, when in actuality, those are the future leaders we need. As Sacks writes, "Adaptive leadership is intensely difficult. People resist change. They erect barriers against it. One is denial. A second is anger. A third is blame. That is why adaptive leadership is emotionally draining in the extreme."[2] In becoming the adaptive leaders we wish to see in our communities, we can finally take the first step in ending the self-destructive cycle of revenge that our military leaders have led us down.

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1 "Two Types of Leadership," d'var Torah on Beha'alotecha by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

2 *Ibid.*

She-Asah Nisim L'Avoteinu: Rejecting the Miracle of Militarism

by Laynie Soloman

In his 1896 political pamphlet *Der Judenstaat* ("The Jewish State"), Theodor Herzl declares, "The Maccabees will rise again." Thus began a centuries-long romance between the project of political Zionism and the Maccabees, the zealous, militaristic protagonists of the Chanukkah story.

We recount in *Al Ha-Nisim* how Chanukkah commemorates when "[G-d] delivered the mighty into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous, and the degenerates into the hands of those immersed in Torah." In Jewish tradition, doing so enabled G-d to make the Divine name great, as G-d "performed a great salvation and miracle for [G-d's] people Israel, as [G-d] does today." Knowing that this story and its violence have served as precedent and inspiration for the nationalist presumed-holy wars in Israel/Palestine for generations, inserting this text into my *tefillah* in this season, at this time, feels unimaginable.

After all, Herzl continues his discussion in *Der Judenstaat* by claiming that,

> *The time has come for us to be sure of our land and die while safeguarding it. Our liberty will call freedom to all the world, they will prosper from our prosperity, and with our greatness they will also grow. And the work of our hands, which we will achieve for our approval and our success, will be a sign and a wonder to the praise and the blessing throughout the land.*

This line of thought sees our wars as miraculous, constitutionally defensive, and holy, interpreting military efforts as the work of G-d's hands. But while war may be the backdrop of the Chanukkah story, war *itself* is not miraculous, and a close read of our Sages' analysis of "miracles" can help us reject those who take up the banner of the Maccabees as a validating paradigm for holy violence, and instead uplift HaShem as the true Source of Miracles.

The very first time a blessing is recited over miraculous events is by Yitro, who hears of Moshe's success freeing *B'nei Yisrael* and proclaims (*Shemot*

[*Exodus*] 18:10): בָּרוּךְ ה׳ אֲשֶׁר הִצִּיל אֶתְכֶם מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם וּמִיַּד פַּרְעֹה אֲשֶׁר הִצִּיל אֶת־הָעָם מִתַּחַת יַד־מִצְרָיִם: / "Blessed is G-d who delivered you from the hand of *Mitzrayim* and from the hand of Pharaoh, and who delivered the people from under the hand of *Mitzrayim*."

Yitro's blessing upon hearing about *B'nei Yisrael*'s miraculous redemption becomes the Gemara's source (Berakhot 54a) for a *berakha* recited in places where a miracle has occurred: שֶׁעָשָׂה נִסִּים לַאֲבוֹתֵינוּ בַּמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה / "Blessed [are You G-d, Eternal Ruler] who made miracles for our ancestors in this place," first described in Mishnah Berakhot 9:1. This blessing is a close cousin, so to speak, of the unique *berakha* we recite on Chanukkah and Purim—שֶׁעָשָׂה נִסִּים לַאֲבוֹתֵינוּ בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם בַּזְּמַן הַזֶּה ("Blessed [are You G-d, Eternal Ruler] who made miracles for our ancestors on these days in this season").

What qualifies something as a "miracle" over which one can make these *berakhot*? The Gemara offers examples, including a variety of supernatural events—like seeing a spring of water magically emerge while thirsty on a harsh journey and passing through walls while being chased by a wild animal, followed by a list of collective miracles from *B'nei Yisrael*'s mythic history (Berakhot 54a):

תָּנוּ רַבָּנַן: הָרוֹאֶה מַעְבְּרוֹת הַיָּם, וּמַעְבְּרוֹת הַיַּרְדֵּן, מַעְבְּרוֹת נַחֲלֵי אַרְנוֹן, אַבְנֵי אֶלְגָּבִישׁ בְּמוֹרַד בֵּית חוֹרוֹן, וְאֶבֶן שֶׁבִּקֵּשׁ לְזָרוֹק עוֹג מֶלֶךְ הַבָּשָׁן עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאֶבֶן שֶׁיָּשַׁב עָלֶיהָ מֹשֶׁה בְּשָׁעָה שֶׁעָשָׂה יְהוֹשֻׁעַ מִלְחָמָה בַּעֲמָלֵק, וְאִשְׁתּוֹ שֶׁל לוֹט, וְחוֹמַת יְרִיחוֹ שֶׁנִּבְלְעָה בִּמְקוֹמָהּ — עַל כּוּלָּן צָרִיךְ שֶׁיִּתֵּן הוֹדָאָה וְשֶׁבַח לִפְנֵי הַמָּקוֹם

The Sages taught in a baraita: One who sees the crossings of the Red Sea; and the crossings of the Jordan; and the crossings of the streams of Arnon; the hailstones of Elgavish on the descent of Beit Choron; the rock that Og, King of Bashan, sought to hurl upon Israel; and the rock upon which Moses sat when Joshua waged war against Amalek; and Lot's wife; and the wall of Jericho that was swallowed up in its place. On all of these miracles one must give thanks and offer praise before G-d.

On the surface, these are moments in which the Jewish people emerge victorious from a collective threat, many involving war of some kind. But the Rabbis read this list differently.

In analyzing what miracle precisely took place in each of these events, our

Sages surface—through textual creativity and imagination—alternative supernatural occurrences that would necessitate a *berakha*. In one example (Berakhbot 54b), the Rabbis change the meaning of the rock upon which Moshe sat during Yehoshua's war with Amalek: it does not merit a blessing because Moshe's activity helped the Jewish people win the war as one might have thought; instead, the rock is blessed because it gave Moshe strength when he would otherwise have been weary—something rocks ordinarily cannot do.

The list of miracles as the gemara in Berakhot 54a/b imagines them consists of seas and rivers parting (the Red Sea, Jordan River, and streams of Arnon), hail falling and suspending mid-air (hailstones of Elgavish), a storm of grasshoppers that destroyed a mountain (the rock of Og), a rock that magically gives strength (the rock upon which Moses sat), humans transforming into salt (Lot's wife), and walls spontaneously collapsing (the wall of Jericho). Though the baraita seems to value both supernatural wonder and military triumph, the rabbis of the gemara creatively offer alternative miracles to clarify that an unexpected victory or survival *itself* is not the miracle—the miracle is a separate, supernatural occurrence.

This same approach is found in the Gemara's unique retelling of the Chanukkah story that famously shifts the miracle from a military victory to the discovery of just enough oil to rededicate the Temple which *miraculously* lasted for eight days (Shabbat 21b):

שֶׁכְּשֶׁנִּכְנְסוּ יְוָנִים לַהֵיכָל טִמְּאוּ כָּל הַשְּׁמָנִים שֶׁבַּהֵיכָל. וּכְשֶׁגָּבְרָה מַלְכוּת בֵּית חַשְׁמוֹנַאי וְנִצְּחוּם, בָּדְקוּ וְלֹא מָצְאוּ אֶלָּא פַּךְ אֶחָד שֶׁל שֶׁמֶן שֶׁהָיָה מוּנָּח בְּחוֹתָמוֹ שֶׁל כֹּהֵן גָּדוֹל, וְלֹא הָיָה בּוֹ אֶלָּא לְהַדְלִיק יוֹם אֶחָד. נַעֲשָׂה בּוֹ נֵס וְהִדְלִיקוּ מִמֶּנּוּ שְׁמוֹנָה יָמִים. לְשָׁנָה אַחֶרֶת קְבָעוּם וַעֲשָׂאוּם יָמִים טוֹבִים בְּהַלֵּל וְהוֹדָאָה.

When the Greeks entered the Sanctuary, they defiled all the oils that were in the Sanctuary. And when the Hasmonean monarchy overcame them and emerged victorious over them, they searched and found only one cruse of oil that was placed with the seal of the High Priest. And there was enough oil there to light the menorah for only one day. A miracle occurred and they lit the menorah from it for eight days. The next year the Sages instituted those days and made them holidays with recitation of hallel *and* hoda'ah.

According to the Gemara, the miracle of Chanukkah takes place *after* the fighting is over. Through recasting this story from one of military triumph—as was the pervasive account in other contemporaneous sources[1]—into one of a supernatural occurrence, our Sages here mirror the *sugya* in Berakhot: war becomes the setting for a clearer, more essential miracle that is sanctified and celebrated.

This clarity is codified by a majority of later sources who declare that we can recite a *berakha* only on miracles that fundamentally יוצא ממנהג העולם ותולדתו / "depart from the ordinary ways of the world."[2] The Magen Avraham exclaims, "How could it be conceivable to call something that is in the natural course of the world a miracle?"[3] In line with other sources, he explains that when a person is saved or survives a harrowing scenario that follows the ordinary ways of the world, they should not say a *berakha* over a miracle—because no miracle occurred—but should instead *bentsch gomel*.

Minhag ha'olam, the way of the world, is to wage war. As long as we live in an unredeemed world, military domination and violence will continue to be the backdrop of our collective miracles. We must take extreme care when we search for miracles not to imagine that the wars themselves can possibly contain a miraculous thread within them, or constitute something holy.

In fact, the mention of war in *Al Ha-Nisim* altogether (וְעַל הַנִּסִּים וְעַל הַפֻּרְקָן / וְעַל הַגְּבוּרוֹת וְעַל הַתְּשׁוּעוֹת **וְעַל הַמִּלְחָמוֹת** שֶׁעָשִׂיתָ לַאֲבוֹתֵינוּ בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם בַּזְּמַן הַזֶּה "and for the miracles and for the wonders and for the mighty acts and

1 The accounts of the Chanukkah story in Maccabees I, Maccabees II, and Josephus each emphasize the Hasmonean military victory culminating in the Temple's rededication as Chanukkah's focal point, and make no mention of the alleged miraculous oil lauded by the Bavli. See Vered Noam, "The Miracle of the Cruse of Oil: The Metamorphosis of a Legend" (2002).

2 This phrase is attributed to the Rosh mi'Lunel. See Nishmat Adam 65:1; Abudraham *Hilkhot Berakhot, Sha'ar 8*, Birchot Shevach Ve'ha'Hoda'ah 4; Shulchan Aruch OC 218:9; Bi'ur Halakha OC 218:9 (ויש חולק). See also the Meiri on Berakhot 54b, who uses similar language to comment that we recite blessings דוקא בנס גדול היוצא מגדרו של עולם / "only on great miracles that depart from the order of the world."

3 A *da'at yachid* here is preserved by the Beit Yosef, as he writes that "Some disagree [with the need for a miracle to depart from the ways of the world], and it is better to bless without mentioning the name and kingdom." Nevertheless, this remains a uniquely held compromised position in which the purported miracle does not necessitate a full blessing, even according to the Beit Yosef.

for the salvations **and for the military triumph** that you made for our ancestors in their days and in this time") is the result of a later liturgical reworking. As scholar R' Reuven Kimmelman points out, earlier versions of *Al Ha-Nisim* found in the minor tractate Masechet Sofrim praise G-d in the following way:

> והודאת פלאות ותשועת כהנים אשר עשית בימי מתתיהו בן יוחנן כהן גדול וחשמונאי ובניו
>
> *"and with acknowledgement of the wonders and the salvation of priests that You wrought in the days of Mattathias son of Yohanan the High Priest, the Hasmonean and his sons."* [4]

Kimmelman suggests that the authors of this now widespread *Al Ha-Nisim* used the militaristic tale of Chanukkah—the very account that the Talmudic rabbis attempted to subvert—to "expand an already existent Chanukkah prayer to reflect the tenor of its telling of the story, one that is quite different than the Chanukkah story in the Babylonian Talmud."

As we recite this prayer, we must not abandon our Talmudic sages, who taught us clearly that war has no place in our accounting of the miraculous. When we bless the wonders and miracles that befell our people many ages ago in this season, may we, in turn, be blessed with the discernment and clarity of our sages to disentangle our spirits from militarism and turn our gaze to G-d's eternal power.

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4 Masechet Sofrim 20:8. See R' Reuven Kimmelman, "Al HaNissim: A Chanukah Prayer Revised to Include 1 Maccabees" (TheTorah.org).

Our Fire, Our Teacher: Chanukkah's Invitation Into Risk

by Risa Dunbar

During the first weeks of November on the North Shore off the coast of Massachusetts, there were a series of rampant brush fires caused by drought that destroyed hundreds of acres of forests and property.[1] The air was thick, heavy, and harsh. The flames spread through the roots of the woods, making them nearly impossible to control. Though it has been several weeks, the impact of the fires continues to be visible: the singed woods, the homes impacted, the weakened, burnt trees. We still don't know the extent of the invisible wounds to the trees' underground root systems and the surrounding ecosystems.

Fire is an inherently unstable entity. It contains both the potential to destroy and the power to offer illumination, warmth, and even sustained transformation. In the Jewish tradition, our Sages emphasize the miracle of the lasting flame as the focal point of Chanukkah's observance; the primary mitzvah. This light is our invitation into the deeper miracle of Chanukkah. Literally, *Chanukkah* means "dedication," traditionally understood as a reference to the victory of the Maccabees regaining control of the Temple in Jerusalem from the Greeks, and (re-)dedicating it for Jewish worship. This, however, is not the central point of dedication. The Temple mattered because of what it allowed us to do— live freely as Jews, serve and be in close partnership with our G-d, and to envision a redemptive reality for our people. One of the most central aspects of sacrificial worship in the Temple is the element of sacred, stable fire.

The Hasidic masters often explored the multiplicity of fire in their works. Particularly, they liken Torah to fire in the many interpretations of *Sefer Vayikra* [Leviticus] which explore the details, visions, and possibilities of the sacrificial services to G-d that were practiced in the Temple. In this context, what kind of light *exactly* did the Maccabees seek to restore in the Temple?

1 "Lynn Woods brush fire doubles in size as it burns over 200 acres," NBC Boston

The Hasidic master Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter (also known as the *Sefat Emet*[2]) brings us insight on this question through his interpretation of the following verse from *Parshat Tzav*[3]:

> *This is the Instruction [for] the offering-up—that is, what goes-up on the blazing-hearth on the altar all night, until daybreak, while the fire of the altar is kept blazing on it:*[4]

The *Sefat Emet* teaches from this verse that the fire power (both the fuel and the flames themselves) upon the sacred altar of the *Mishkan* [Tabernacle] is the fear and the love of G-d that can singe destructive thoughts inside of us, burning them to ashes that are ceremoniously lifted (elevated) away from the *mizbeach* [altar] of our souls' prayer and sacred living.[5] The possibility to extinguish and remove the toxic kind of fire within, is both literal and metaphorical.[6] The *Sefat Emet* teaches:

> *G-d commands His grace by day, and at night "His song is with me" (Ps. 42:9) - that is the fire that "burns upon its altar all the night." This order is present with us each day, as the light of Torah works in the person, burning and consuming improper thoughts. All this takes place through Torah, which is called fire.*

> ביער כו' הכהן הוא האהבה כמ"ש בכל יום נמשך חוט של חסד. יומם יצוה ה' חסדו. ובלילה שירה עמי הוא אש תמיד כו' על מוקדה כל הלילה. וכן הוא הסדר בכל יום כפי מה שאור התורה פועל באדם להיות שורף ומבער מחשבות זרות. כי הכל הוא

2 Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter, 19th and early 20th c., Warsaw, Poland. He is often referred to as the *Sefat Emet* (lit. "The Language of Truth"), the title of his main work and a series of Hasidic commentaries on the Torah.

3 *Parshat Tzav* (literally "He commanded") outlines G-d's instructions to Moshe to command Aaron and his sons about the proper duties and rights of the priesthood who offer sacrifices (animal and meal offerings) in the Sanctuary. The priests are tasked with eating of the sin and guilt offerings and the remainder of the meal offering. The peace offering is eaten by the one who brings it (a layperson) except for specified portions given to the priests. The holy requirements of the eating are articulated and Aaron and his sons return to the sanctuary for 7 days for their coronation as priests by Moses.

4 Leviticus 6:2. Translation from *The Five Books of Moses* by Everett Fox. New York, Schocken Books, 1995.

5 Alter, J., & Green, A.. *Tzav*. Section. *The Language of Truth: The Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet*. 154. New York, NY. Jewish Publication Society of America. 2012.

6 *Ibid.*

Within the context of the Chanukkah story, the miraculous oil and its illumination through the chanukkiah can be compared to the fuel and flames of the holy fire on the sacred altar. The fire of Chanukkah, as the symbol of the miraculous rededication of the Temple, then, suggests that we can shift a destructive version of the fire we each have inside into something luminous for the world. Even more importantly, this fire is considered to be "Torah" itself; that is, it is the teaching of embodied living.[7] The *Sefat Emet* continues:

> *There is fire that gives light—this refers to the 248 positive commandments of Torah, [performed] out of love. And there is a fire that burns—[these are] the 365 prohibitions, [observed] from fear of heaven. The commandment here to remove the ashes [on the holy altar] hints that as we burn up the waste in our lives we are uplifted each day, and then we are given new light. This redemptive process is with us every single day. For the one who serves G-d in a simple way, daily accepting divine rule in reciting the Shema and saying, "you shall love" then reads: "These words which I command you today shall be upon your heart"—that is the light made new each day.*[8]

> ויש אש מאיר הוא רמ״ח מ״ע שבתורה מאהבה. ויש אש שורף משס״ה ל״ת מיראה. ומצות
> הרמת הדשן הוא לרמוז כי כפי מה ששורפין הפסולת נעשה מזה עלי׳ בכל יום ועי״ז יורד הארה חדשה אח״כ. ובכל יום ויום נמצא אלה התיקונים. ובעובד ה׳ כפשטו כשמקבל בכל יום מלכות שמים בק״ש ואהבת כו׳ וכתיב והיו הדברים כו׳ אנכי מצוך היום שהוא הארה המתחדשת בכל יום על לבבך ודברת כו׳

In this articulation of fire, the *Sefat Emet* explains the basic properties of fire to be destruction and elevation. He explains that the seemingly paradoxical properties of the fire, through its capacity to warm and also to burn, can be balanced through proper examination and living, including through utterances of G-d's love. We each have the power to uplift, offer, and move the world toward more generosity and justice. The *Sefat Emet* continues:

7 The root for Torah is *yud-resh-heh*, which means "instruct" or "throw." It is the word for embodied teaching.

8 Alter, J., & Green, A.. Tzav. Section. *The Language of Truth: The Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet*. 154. New York, NY. Jewish Publication Society of America. 2012.

"And you shall speak of them when you dwell in your house and when you walk by the way, when you lie down and when you rise up"—we receive this light until we lie down and arise again. That is [the fire that burns] "all night, until the morning" (Lev. 6:2). 3:24f.[9]

ובשכבך שצריכין לקבל זו ההארה עד השכיבה והקימה. כל הלילה עד הבוקר כנ"ל

In other words, the *Sefat Emet* explains that the light that is restored when the Maccabees light the menorah with one day's worth of oil—the fire of devotional fear and love—is always possible for us to access. But we must understand and learn how to balance the fear and love inside of us in order to actually live this way.

Devastatingly, we see the fire of destruction and undesirable thought around us all the time: it can be found as a longing for acceptance that manifests in conditional, coercive, or xenophobic love which honors one kind of person over another. It can originate as a fear for safety that presents as a fear that festers and leads to hatred. Like destructive fire, hatred, selfishness, and supremacy can consume us. And we have seen arson, the outward manifestation of this destructive fire, deployed as a tool of terror and intimidation by our Jewish siblings in the name of religious nationalism.[10]

Environmental terror is not uncommon. In May 2024 I went to the Jordan Valley for an overnight protective presence shift[11] and witnessed firsthand many of the ways that pastoral Palestinian life in the West Bank is being snuffed out and destroyed. I met with a family living in a tent near the main highway in the Jordan Valley, very close to a large settlement which loomed over the hillside. At one point, I noticed that the plastic tarp flap beside my

9 Alter, J., & Green, A.. Tzav. Section. *The Language of Truth: The Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet*. 154. New York, NY. Jewish Publication Society of America. 2012.

10 "Israeli settlers attack two Palestinian towns and their own military in West Bank," Dec. 4, 2024, Reuters

11 Protective presence is a strategy of nonviolent activism primarily in Area C of the West Bank, and consists of Jewish Israelis and Internationals accompanying Palestinian shepherds on their land to prevent and deter violence against them, their families, and their property, and to ideally prevent land confiscation and theft at the hands of radical Jewish settlers. It has been a method of resistance since around the early 2000s.

mattress appeared melted and burned. When I asked about it, our hosts relayed that two weeks earlier, the settlers from over the hill had set fire to the family's field and their tent. Thank G-d the fire did not spread, but the Palestinian family had to use their limited water to put it out. The singed smell no longer lingered, but the psychological terror and the financial loss were testaments to the impact the violent fire of hatred can have.

The settlers' abusive and criminal behaviors show us the destructive potential our inner fire can have. Many of us in the Jewish world are hesitant to confront this latent horror, and to face that it can come from a corruption and unbalancing of our own tradition. We don't want to face that the fire of love for Torah, which we hold so dear, is easily turned into a corrupt weapon. If the fire of fear and love inside each of us becomes corrupted, it can rush out with vengeance, wildness, and terror. Examining the destructive potential within ourselves is scary, but we really become destructive when we refuse to face this possibility. We're afraid to think about how we can become corrupted. It's not always easy to moderate the unbalanced fear and love inside of us and one another, and confronting latent possibilities for evil within ourselves can feel risky. But if we believe it is possible to uplift our thoughts and world through love and a healthy amount of fear, then confronting our worst impulses individually and as a people and overcoming them is worth it. In the words of author and theorist bell hooks, "the practice of love offers no place of safety. We risk loss, hurt, pain. We risk being acted upon by forces outside our control."[12]

Chanukkah's lesson then is to engage with the risk of love and fear contained in fire; to gaze at what exists, kindle it, and then transform it with new vision and elevation. There are many forms that such vulnerability may take, and risk tolerance must be assessed individually and sensitively to make our actions sustainable. For some, it might mean facing preconceptions of supremacy that we have been raised with. For others, it may mean refusing to be afraid to confront the toxic, violent fire found in Jewish nationalism, articulating our political position in hostile communities, or putting our money or bodies on the line in protest or solidarity with Palestinians. These risks are rooted in daring to love all people; in taking on these risks, we confront our fear of destructive forces and transform it, rather than

12 hooks, bell. Mutuality: The Heart of Love. Section. *All About Love*: New Visions. 153. New York, NY: William Morrow, 2000.

being consumed. Chanukkah's miraculous light, like the light of the fire from the *mizbeach*, urges us to rededicate ourselves to understanding that paradox and danger exist, and we can elevate these realities into a vision for an illuminated future. We do this by taking risks, loving radically and facing our fears. We always have this capacity within us, to stoke [the fire that burns) "all night, until the morning."[13] May we see and cultivate such living in ourselves and others, and may we feel it breathe a warmer world speedily and steadily into our days.

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13 Leviticus 6:2.

Is Santa Real?

by Jacob Hahn

The first time I participated in a Jewish conspiracy to ruin Christmas was in the second grade. I'd only learned a year ago that some people at the local public school weren't Jewish. My group of friends was two kids I knew from Hebrew school and a third friend who I would later understand to be Evangelical.

We'd take out room temperature kosher turkey sandwiches and parve Oreos at lunchtime, mushed from a half-day of abuse and clammy with lunchbox condensation only to make peace watching him talk with a mouth full of half-masticated lunchline mush. Three days before Christmas break, he was yapping on about decorating the Christmas tree so Santa could put gifts under it. When Santa gave him a PlayStation 3 the year earlier, there was an unspoken agreement between the three of us not to ruin Santa for him. Maybe it was his steaming lunchline chicken fingers, lukewarm milk cocoa, or the prominence of Christmas decorations around the school. This year, jealousy broke the pact. *But how can Santa not be real when I have gifts under my tree every Christmas? Last year when I was really good he gave me the present I wanted! You guys played on the PS3 Santa gave me!* It was your parents, we told him. They're lying to you. He put up a fight, but whatever we said, he started to cry, yelled a bit, and ran away. We divvied up the spoils of his leftovers and laughed at his tantrum.

Buzzed off treif chicken fingers and the primal thrill of group cruelty, we left lunch conspiring to spread the truth about Santa at recess. After a few rounds of scrooging, someone must have snitched. We finished recess in the front office, feet swinging off the adult-sized chairs between giggle fits. We'd spoiled Christmas, and had a great time doing it.

From a young age, I learned to reject the idea "Chanukkah is Jewish Christmas." Our winter holiday—minor compared to the High Holidays or Passover—was about miracles, opposing assimilation and bringing light to dark times. Unlike my seven-year-old friend, I made it well into

young adulthood before a truth taunted me all the same: your parents and community exaggerated, they fibbed. Some parts were left out and when the truth was less efficient, they'd outright lie.

The pagan celebration of Jesus's birth in winter, tales of a benevolent omnipotent all-seeing Santa, and its general prominence in American life makes it an inevitable necessity for Jewish families to point at the Rockefeller Christmas Tree and tell their children—"See that? We are not that."

If it's not Jewish Christmas, what, then, is Chanukkah? From an outsider's perspective, or a child's perspective, what purpose does it serve? While a minor holiday, it holds a prominence in contemporary Jewish life unlike any other. It is the favorite holiday of many secular Jews, and its symbols recur year-round unlike the symbols of any other holiday. The seal of the State of Israel is a menorah. A menorah marks every Israeli passport and is on the seal of the Knesset, where a menorah statue sits at the entrance. The coins have menorahs. The menorah is the seal of the President, the Mossad, the Revisionist Movement Beitar and the hyper-racist Beitar Jerusalem football team. Beitar Jerusalem is currently third in the table, trailing only a few points behind Maccabi Tel Aviv and Maccabi Haifa, the best teams in the league, both part of the Maccabi Sporting Organization which, under the Maccabi health insurance conglomerate, runs the Maccabiah Jewish Olympics once every four years. In artistic portrayals of Judah Macabee, his shield is often drawn as a *magen David*. There's no basis for this; it just makes intuitive sense. In Israel and the United States, sentiments about the importance of being proud like Judah Maccabee are taken from the pulpit on saturday and put in hebrew school on sunday. Just last month, a new brigade for Haredim in the IDF was announced—*Chashmonaim*, The Hasmoneans. They'll join the infamous Haredi unit *Netzach Yehuda*, Judah's Victory. Lighting the first candle at the Kotel in December 2023, Netanyahu said: "We, the Maccabees of our times, are fighting the forces of evil that have come to wipe the Jewish people and its state off the face of the Earth. We are showing the same determination, heroism and sacrifice."

There was a time where "Revisionist Zionism" called themselves 'Revisionist' because a narrative of "Might Makes Right" was understood as an attack on the very essence of what keeps Judaism alive. Choosing the Maccabees as national symbols was necessary to lend a sense of

historical legitimacy to this project. The power of these symbols stuck with Revisionist Zionism when it became mainstream Zionism, and carried it all the way to Zionism becoming inseparable from Judaism in the eyes of our community and the world.

It happened to us, and it happened to them. From the slave owner "Founding Fathers" to Abraham Lincoln, lingering Puritan traditions opposed Christmas and limited it to a minor, cultural holiday deep into the late 19th century. Along with an influx of Christmas-observing European immigrants, consumer capitalism latched onto Santa Claus to elevate Christmas into the most important holiday of the American calendar. Christmas and Channukah now both hold cultural prominence mismatched to their religious origins, encouraging interpretations and practices that oppose the values of their religious source. Just as the CEO of Big Toy wants children to believe Santa is real, Benjamin Netanyahu wants children to believe that the Maccabees were heroes.

After two millennia of Rabbinic Judaism's survival without military or political autonomy, we see why the sages were careful to place emphasis on the oil as miracle. Absentmindedly teaching children to view the Maccabees as heroes plants a seed whispering that power is necessary and communal violence, just as done by the Maccabees, can be a divinely-ordained method to achieve it. From the tiny seed of the childhood Chanukkah story, we get a pressing and painful contemporary problem: millions of Jews are trapped in a concept of peoplehood and history that is little more than an expansion of Hebrew School Chanukkah. We are the good guys, making our violences holy and justified. Our enemies are the evil children of darkness with no cause but feral hate. It's not nice to say out loud, but the world would be better off with them dead anyways. Internal enemies are hellenizing traitors that deserve no mercy. In the minds of impassioned Hasmonean loyalists, questioning any part of that story is heresy.

Unchecked for a century and nurtured by political necessity, the seed sprouted, blossomed, spread its roots, and now bears the poison fruits of genocidal fascism. Identifying themselves as "children of a 3000 year-old culture" and claiming a divine and genetic right to "The Third Jewish Kingdom," "Neo-Maccabees" are not the first fascists to think a historical claim gives them the right to kill people. Fascism relies on maintaining a constant state of childlike simplicity, reducing history and politics to empty

slogans beyond questioning. Latching onto a juvenile understanding of the Hasmoneans and Judean kings, incomprehensible evil is made into holiness.

This Chanukkah, we may see the Maccabees cited as a justification for the continuation of mass murder in Gaza. Autonomy, after all, must be maintained. Like the Hasmoneans, the Israeli government relies on perpetual warfare to stay in power. Like every unjust king of Israel, they cower behind censorship and imprisonment to silence the prophets who foresee destruction and weep. We are held under the thumb of a murderous criminal king who goes to the world, claims to speak for all Jews, and makes us pay the price for his perverted self-interest. Identifying himself as leading 'children of the light', we blindly follow our Maccabee king into battle against the most basic forces of nature and history.

The way out of this heresy is unclear, but a first step would be mythbreaking. They can cry and scream and stomp their feet as much as they want, but that won't make Santa any more real: The Maccabees are not and never will be Jewish heroes. Lives and souls are at stake. A narrative so sure of being right, immune at every level to criticism and critical thought, is blind to seeing reality on its own terms. When the Prime Minister of Israel makes a connection between himself and the Maccabees, he means it literally. When *hasbara* labels college students as "brainwashed" and internal enemies as "Hellenizers," it is literal. When fifty-five Palestinians in Silwan are made homeless by The City of David in cooperation with the Jerusalem Municipality, the open justification is a literal, 1:1 continuation between ancient Judean kings and the modern state of Israel.

If this insanity is to be stopped across all levels of observance, framing the Hasmoneans as Hellenizers and Zionism as Assimilationism can be a helpful tool to frame Jewish history. The other story has stagnated and rotted; no matter how innocent or heinous, a lie can only last so long. Accepting Santa isn't real can be hard but once it's over, it's done. It's just a story we used to believe.

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Jacob Hahn is a writer and translator from Orlando, Florida

An Allegory of Broken Oil Jars: Chanukkah Amidst Ongoing War

by Sara Klugman

A week after October 7th, in the chaos of a rushed departure from Jerusalem, I spent a few strange weeks in Arles, France. On and off throughout my twenties and early thirties, I had made my home in the Jerusalem left. Each chapter of my life in the land was a sketched-together throughline of intersecting communities: anti-occupation and anti-apartheid activists, secular Jewish-Israeli dancers and artists, diasporic traditional halachic weirdos. Those nights in France, however—I reached for something I had never previously sought out—the "other" perspective. I hungered for diatribes from Facebook acquaintances—about the importance of Jewish life above all, statements in certitudes. I felt something surging in my throat, and thought, "At least they care." As those disjointed nights progressed and the distance from the initial shock began to increase, I slowly had an experience of coming to; of coming back to myself and my values—and realized that I had found solace in abhorrent and inexcusable sentiments. It was like coming to a horror film, watching an unfamiliar face reflected back in your bedroom mirror.

One of those early evenings in mid-October, I logged onto a Zoom call with All That's Left. I remember one person on the call coming back on camera after taking cover during a siren. He reflected, with equanimity, on the leftist perspective that Hamas' actions on October 7th were justified decolonial actions that merit celebration. I remember him explaining the perspective, saying, "Violence, of course, is a type of resistance." He reflected plainly, "I think in hearing this, I can learn more about the lines in my own solidarity work. I am seeing how the liberation that I personally want to fight for, does not include violence against my people." He reflected, re-dedicated—and the conversation continued. I felt a moment of nachat ruach—touching back down to earth.

Chanukkah was the first festival we celebrated after the 7th. In the ever-advancing, ever-looping reel of Jewish time, tradition can be a locating

instrument: to see not only where we have been, but where we are. The Gemara, explicating on Chanukkah's origin story, writes, "When the Greeks entered the Sanctuary they defiled all the oils that were in the Sanctuary by touching them. And when the Hasmonean monarchy overcame them and emerged victorious over them, they searched and found only one jar of oil that was placed with the seal of the High Priest, undisturbed by the Greeks.

שכשנכנסו יוונים להיכל טמאו כל השמנים שבהיכל. וכשגברה מלכות בית חשמונאי ונצחום, בדקו ולא מצאו אלא פך אחד של שמן שהיה מונח בחותמו של כהן גדול[1]

The word Chanukkah comes from the verb— חנָ —meaning to dedicate. This year, I imagine the "undedicated" jars: those that were trampled, cracked, shattered, scattered. I can see the Hasmoneans making their way through the ruin, stepping over spilled wine, and broken glass.
This Canukkah, we look downward at the temple floor. Canukkah pulls a question into view: how do we rededicate, when our temple is full of broken glass?

As we face our second Chanukkah after October 7th so too, we face the ongoing failure of our movements to end the war. In a year of immeasurable grief and tremendous effort, the bombing continues, breaking windows and bones. Ahmed Moor, a Palestinian American writer and activist, with a panel of Palestinian solidarity activists and scholars at a Jewish Currents event, wrote, "We need to recognize the insufficiency of all of this effort to meet the need." Our movements, he said, in the land and abroad, have failed to meet the pace and scale of the war—and the 100 years of violence that preceded it. So many Palestinians have been killed, so many centrists and even leftists have "sobered" and moved right – so many of us are struggling not to give up.[2]

In the weeks that followed the 7th, most days I woke up gasping for air, my windpipe constricted. I remember thinking that I was having an unusual human experience in the history of humanity. That is—experiencing the widespread phenomena of war only now. It is strange to have never

1 Shabbat 21b
2 "Palestinian Liberation After the Destruction of Gaza," *On the Nose* podcast, *Jewish Currents*, Oct. 10, 2024

lived through war until my thirties—to be new to the flood of fear, self-preservation, despair, panic. I was learning that there is no morality that is airtight. Learning that I too, can sink. And learning that we all from time to time need to re-dedicate ourselves.

I returned to West Jerusalem right before Chanukkah. Unlike East Jerusalem, the West Bank, or Gaza, and unlike the evacuated north and south of Israel, my housing was not under threat of destruction. This degree of safety made it possible to look up and out. In my particular looking up and out, I learned from being at the feet of, and shoulder to shoulder with, a community that supported and preserved my heart. In the community that I had the privilege of living in this past year, the roll-out of devastating news—a tireless litany of insurgent, state, and random violence—mobilized us into positions of support and resistance. I want to offer a peek into a small, tight-knit, struggling light of a movement against the occupation, against apartheid, and now urgently against the war in Gaza. A movement committed to re-dedication in the geography of the hopeless.

Some snapshots: patchwork of retired professors, punk acrylic-nailed femmes, and quiet engineering students piling into worn-out cars, heading for the Jordan Valley to stay overnight. Sitting on the floor in the Hand in Hand school, for a "leftist conference," which was called tongue in cheek, "*yachad nenatzeach*."[3] Arranging networks of food delivery to friends who had been dragged across pavement and brutally arrested for assembling in peaceful protest. Working with Mohammed, a farmer from outside of Bethlehem, with a group of activists, standing in the rain to trim the leaves of a scorched grapevine that the IDF hadn't let him cultivate his land since the 7th, five months prior.

A friend and I sat in his Nachlaot apartment to record a conversation about what we were learning. I want to share some of his words: "There was a meeting on October 8. At the Hadash HQ, of Free Jerusalem, and All That's Left, just to like, process together. I didn't understand half of it. There were people there who knew people who had just been killed, there were people there who had just talked to people in East Jerusalem who

3 In Hebrew, "together we will win." This slogan became ubiquitous in Israel after the war.

were scared out of their minds about what was going to happen next… people who know people living in Gaza. And it was all of this sadness, and holding it all in one place… It felt so meaningful to me. And if there weren't a community here of people who were already doing these things, …there never would have been a level of trust to have that happen. If you don't have trust, you aren't able to do things like this."

This Chanukkah, I lift up this particular vision of rededication: a fugitive hope-building movement, run by its own battery. A rededication amidst the oily slick of broken glass. A reminder that when our eyes are obscured by despair and anger—our throats tight with fear—we can turn to networks of resistance who remind us what is worth saving. And in this rededication—illuminated by one jar of long-burning oil—we glimpse how we might survive.

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Suggested tzedakah

This Chanukkah, Halachic Left is partnering with the Green Olive Collective to replant olive trees destroyed by settler violence in the West Bank. As we meditate on themes of rebuilding and dedication after calamity, we feel it's uniquely fitting to contribute to the regrowth of razed olive resources. All money raised through this link goes directly to purchasing olive saplings with our Palestinian partners.
bit.ly/olivesaplings

Support Our Friends in Gaza: Since November 2023, a group of Jewish international & Israeli activists have been in close contact with these families—anonymous for everyone's safety—and are continuing to work to sustain them as we fight for this nightmare to end. Donate to make a kiddush Hashem and help save lives.
https://bit.ly/supportjawan

All That's Left is a collective unequivocally opposed to the Occupation and committed to building the Diaspora angle of resistance.
https://allthatsleftcollective.com/

Halachic Left is a grassroots movement of halachically-observant Jews advocating for our communities to oppose Jewish supremacy, support ending the Israeli military control and occupation of Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and work for a just and equitable future for Israelis and Palestinians.
https://halachicleft.org/