

D'var Torah: Shabbat Chanuka 5772 (2012)

Last week at lunch I taught about this old legend I just discovered, about another miracle associated with the Second Temple, the *Beit Hamikdash Hasheni*. In the first chapter of Second Maccabees, one of our earliest sources for the story of Chanuka, the writer mentions a tradition called "The Feast of the Fire." According to the legend, when the Babylonians destroyed the first *Beit Hamikdash*, some *kohanim* took fire from the altar and buried it – they hid it, in a secret cistern, which is a pit coated with lime for storing rain water, somewhere near the Temple Mount.

After seventy years, the Persians took over and allowed the Jews to return. The Jewish leader Nechemiah instructed the *kohanim* to find and dig up this fire, so they could use it on the new altar in the rebuilt *Beit Hamikdash*.

What they found, instead of the fire, was a thick liquid. Nechemiah told the *kohanim* to bring it anyway, and pour it on the wood for the sacrifice and the offering itself. And as the sun emerged from the clouds, this liquid did its work and a fire burst forth from the altar and consumed the offering. And apparently, this first fire in the renewed Temple caused the altar itself to shine with a bright light, even brighter than the fire of another sacrifice.

This seems to me obviously the source for the miracle of the cruise of oil that we all know about. But that's not why I'm mentioning it. The story of the hidden fire is really a clue, a symbol, of what the Chanuka miracle is all about.

Hidden fire. Hidden light. Hidden hope. Hidden hope that emerges from a place where you didn't expect it, where you didn't know it already was, where you didn't know you could find it. That is what the miracle of Chanuka amounts to.

Chanuka is (as Adam Sandler says) the festival of light. We always say that the lights of Chanuka are lit at the darkest time of the year. But that's not precisely true. The darkest time of year in the northern hemisphere is the winter solstice, around December 21, when our part of the globe leans farthest away from the sun, because of the tilt of the Earth's axis. About three years out of four, Chanuka begins before the solstice, often many days or even weeks before.

The Maharal of Prague, Rabbi Loew of Golem fame, noticed this. He taught that the light of Chanuka is really the *or haganuz*, the light that was created on the first day of Creation but hidden away until the sun and stars were made on the fourth day to show light. Chanuka, the Maharal teaches, is the uncovering of the stored light. It is the hidden fire that Nechemiah found. It is the cruise of oil hidden away where Antiochus' forces could not obliterate it, but where the Maccabees knew they could find it when they needed it.

The point is that the light of Chanuka is not just a symbol of hope. It's not just that a small spark of hope lights our darkest times. It's that hope is something that is prepared, that is set up ahead of time and then put away so it's there when we need it.

Rabbi Simon Jacobson says that when things are dark in our lives, by definition we have trouble hoping. So when times are good, we have to prepare. That's the story of Yosef in today's *parasha* -- when there are years of plenty, save up for the years of famine that will follow. We have to learn the story of Chanuka when we're safe, so we can have it when we need it, as the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto or the Haganah had it when they had to fight against tremendous enemies. When we're in good health, we ought to live in a way that sets up some of the hope we'll need when we may ourselves be sick one day. Rabbi Jacobson calls this "preparing lifeboats of hope." He says that a person who is depressed, who knows that there are dark days, says to a friend on a good day:

"I will go into a darkness like that. I want you to come and I will tell you, 'Don't come to my basement or don't speak to me,' I just want you to be there." And you, [the friend, you] prepare yourself. That's the key.

Then, he says, when the day comes that the friend really needs support, and all you can do is be there, even when your friend is in darkness -- you stay, you stay in the house or on the phone for just a few minutes, and that's the small light, the one candle, the small cruise of oil. And sometimes, more times than we realize, that small light makes a difference, and maybe breaks through the darkness, and brings hope to someone we know who is hurting. It doesn't have to be hope that things will be all right, but hope that a friend is not alone, that his or her life matters to people.

During times of light, we ought to live our own lives this way -- valuing good friendship, looking for wisdom about life's challenges before we have to face them. It's what we offer each other as well, by being that kind of friend, by being in a community that shares wisdom, and fears, and insight.

And when, God forbid, we have to face our own adversities, then the hidden light may not be so hidden. And the true hope, that our lives have value, that our health and our actions mean something to others, won't be so hidden.

And that is the meaning of the blessing we say each night at the candles. We praise and thank God, *she-asa nissim... bayamim hahaym, bazman hazeh*. Who made miracles in days past, to remind us that hope is available in present time.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Urim Sameach!