

# Chanukah

It's December...it's the Hebrew month of Kislev and that means what? It means great presents...jam donuts...greasy latkes...coloured candles...'lovely' singing.....Who doesn't like Chanukah? For many, Chanukah is the perfect festival or *chag* as it has a great blend of tradition, fun & ritual. We like lighting candles for 8 days, we love getting pressies & having the fake jam drip over all our clothes! But surely there's more to Chanukah than that...

Well actually there is and in fact asking the question, 'What is Chanukah **actually** about?' is not such a mad question after all and is one that the Rabbis of old in the Talmud asked centuries and centuries ago....written in the section of the Babylonian Talmud dealing with Shabbat (go figure!) the question is asked, "*What is Chanukah?*"...

*Our Rabbis taught: On the 25<sup>th</sup> of Kislev the 8 days of Chanukah start and on these days you are forbidden to lament for the dead or fast. For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils inside and when the Hasmonean dynasty triumphed and defeated the Syrian Greeks, they searched and found only one container of oil which lay with the seal of the High Priest, but it only contained enough for one days lighting only, yet a miracle occurred and they lit the Temple menorah for 8 days."*

So there we go...it's all about a miracle of the oil and the defeat of the Syrian Greeks...one teensy weensy bit lasted for 8 whole days and the little band of Yidden defeated the Syrian Greek army...fabulous. We have this confirmed in the *Al Hanissim* prayer that we say after we have lit the first candle when it says, "*These candles that we light, (we light) because of the miracles; the wonders; the salvations and the battles that you did for our ancestors in those days at this time through the hands of Your holy priests...*"

This is what Chanukah is really about...the presents are lovely, the candles are nice but there is a much more serious side to it; in essence, we are celebrating a miraculous, historical triumph of the Jewish people! There are also some remarkable and very interesting characters in this story, one of the main ones being a guy called Mattityahu who lives in a town called Modiin...he gets challenged by the Syrian Greek king to offer paganistic sacrifices in the hope that if Mattityahu will do it then his fellow Jews would follow suit...however, Mattityahu is having none of it in *Sefer HaMaccabee 1*, the Book of the Maccabees 1 (ch.2:20-22) he says,

*I and my sons and my brothers will continue to live by the covenant of our ancestors. Far be it from us to desert the law and the commandments. We will not obey the king's words by turning aside from our religion to the right hand or to the left.*

Viva la revolution! No one forces us to leave our traditions, customs and laws...Is this what Chanukah is all about? Is it all about revolution? If so, what are the aims of the revolution? What are we revolting against?

American Jewish journalist and author Anne Roiphe in an article written way back in 1989 for *Tikkun* magazine (vol.4 no.6) gives one suggestion, that by celebrating Chanukah and understanding Judaism & Jewish values we are engaging in a revolution against society; a revolution against becoming 'just like everyone else'. She wrote,

*"When I was growing up, Christmas was the only holiday of the solstice that was important. My mother found it hard to resist the twinkling lights, the trees, Rudolph, and the presents were around her. At that time, no one celebrated Chanukah in a way that could compete with the apparent joyousness of Christmas. This was no small matter because the power of Christmas – the carols, the Mass and the commercial hooplah – was very great and made the American mainstream Christian world seem more appealing than the Jewish one. Now I see Chanukah as a time when, as we light the candles, we pause in awe before the Jewish people whose survival through adversity brings light into the darkness of the human soul. When Jews resist Christmas, we re-affirm our own separate identity."*

Re-affirming our own separate identity... that would be a great answer to the Rabbis of the Talmud question, "What is Chanukah?" It's all about rebelling against the world around us and saying that I want to be different and I am proud of that difference. Another way of affirming ones own identity is allowing it to inspire others. We should strive to have a deep understanding of Judaism to enable us to teach and engage other communities. Chanukah has a powerful message that allows us to do this. Daniel Gordis, a leading Jewish educator and writer and Director of the Mandel Jerusalem Fellows Programme writes in his book *Does the World Need the Jews?* that,

*"Judaism's claim is simple: Jews have a voice; it is the voice that reminds the world of the power of the weak... Just as we survived as a powerless minority, we cry to the world, so, too, can you."... The Jewish festival of lights is designed to bring light to those in need. Hanukkah is not only a holiday on which Jews celebrate their own experience, but rather, a festival in which Jews seek to bring a message of hope to the disenfranchised everywhere... On Hanukkah, Jews remind the weak and the impoverished everywhere that our own survival should give them cause for hope."* (pp. 119-126)

Amazing! We shouldn't just know about Chanukah or not just light the candles. The answer to the question, *What is Chanukah?*, is to help other communities that want or need our help. As students, we have the ability to find or create spare hours in our week. We are able, therefore, to light the candles, say the *brachot* (the blessings), sing the songs and then we can take our experiences and our learning for the benefit of the different communities around us. The challenge for us is to find the appropriate channel for us to use our time, experiences and skills in a way that is a fitting follow on from the heroic story of rebellion and survival that is Chanukah. Gordis writes in a similar vein that,

*We need not understand why the Jews have survived. We may never know that. The simple fact, though, is that we have survived. We, too, frail but breathing at times, are still here. That message, says our tradition, is one we ought to use to fill the world with hope.*

Not only do we fill the world with hope, we fill the world with light. The beauty of Chanukah is that during the dark wintery days, we put our *menorah* or *chanukiah* in a place that everyone can see it. One of the *mitzvot* or commandments of Chanukah is that we should allow everyone to see the *chanukiah*. The Rabbis of the Talmud and other works of *halacha*, Jewish law tell us that we should place the candles in a public place. The *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*, (a 19<sup>th</sup> Century *halachic* work) (139:7), tells us that, "*if there is a window facing a public place, they should be lit there...*" This is so we can engage in *pirsuma de-nissa*, the proclaiming or publicising of the miracle to show and tell the world our story.

We have so far looked at the power of Chanukah and the opportunity it affords us to not only think about our tradition, but to inspire the world around us. There is another part of the Chanukah story that inspires us to think about the power that spirituality or Judaism has to have a positive impact. On Shabbat we read the Torah portion followed by a reading from the Prophets, the *Nevi'im*. On the Shabbat of Chanukah we read from the book of *Zechariah*. In it we read a *pasuk*, a sentence, (*Ch.4:6*) often quoted that should inspire us all to action,

*"Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit – said the Eternal God of Hosts."*

May this Chanukah see the spirit of peace prevail for Israel and for all the communities around the world who pray for and want peace.

Wishing you a *Chag Chanukah Sameach*, a Happy Chanukah!!

Adam Overlander-Kaye