

## FROM THE PRESIDENT

### Oh Chanukah, Oh Chanukah: The Meaning of Chanukah for the Modern Orthodox Community

Rabbi Asher Lopatin



With the heroic zealotry of Judah Maccabee and his brothers at its core, it may seem that Chanukah does not reflect the Modern Orthodox message of tolerance and respect for the other, be it Jews who observe differently or non-Jews. After all, Chanukah is the holiday where we celebrate winning our right to practice a particular Judaism, a practice we have kept for millennia: We celebrate our freedom to wear *kippot* outside, to observe Shabbat even when it means leaving work early, to follow the Jewish calendar and recognize Rosh Chodesh, and of course, to keep kosher. As Jews living in America, our struggles toward observance do tend to be quite different than those of the Maccabees. We struggle with finding the time and discipline to learn more Torah or to get to *shul* on Rosh Chodesh. Our challenge is to ensure that the excited “Greek” world outside is enhancing our Judaism rather than detracting from it. Still, we continue the struggle to maintain our Jewishness.

Perhaps focusing more on the zealous nature of Chanukah would help keep us better focused on who we are as Jews. Perhaps the more we reject modernity and the values we see in the world around us, the better Jews we become. I would suggest that Chazal rejected this notion with their clear attitude toward Chanukah. Rabbi Solomon Rockove, z”l, lived in my community in Chicago for many years. He used to rail against the Maccabees and the over-celebration of Chanukah, arguing that by not allowing Chanukah into the Six Orders of the Mishna or allowing the Book of Maccabees – or any mention of them – into the Tanakh, the rabbis were giving a clear indication of their distaste for the Chashmonaim and their approach. Rabbi Rockove argued that Chazal did everything they could to squelch this holiday of zealotry and intra-Jewish

fighting. Ultimately compromising with a people who wanted or needed the heroics of the Maccabees marked on the calendar, they allowed for a much muted holiday. And Chanukah remained toned down until it found footing in America, blossoming from the influence of the mega-holiday, Christmas. It is ironic that our remembrance of the Maccabees’ fight against surrounding negative influence has become a major holiday thanks to the questionable consumer values that bombard us everywhere we go this time of year.

But Chazal’s approach to Chanukah espouses openness to the world around us and tolerance of difference. In lighting the candles, we open up to the world around us with the light of Torah and *mitzvot* guiding us in our exploration of the other. As the Rama ruled in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, only when the world endangers us by trying to force a cessation of our practices and beliefs do we close the window. But, as our Rabbis saw it, the ideal is to keep the window open, to show the world the beauty of Judaism, and to show a respect for, and an eagerness to connect with, *regel min hashuk* – the strangers walking in the street.

Let us celebrate this beautiful *chag* by remembering the pride of the Chashmonaim but also the openness of Chazal to the outside world. May this Chanukah be for all of Israel a time when we can walk proudly – in the streets of Jerusalem, Paris, or anywhere else in the world – in safety, security, and joy. May it be a time for us to take in the goodness existing in world around us. Most importantly, may we celebrate the love that we have for all Jews, and the honor and respect we have for all mankind, as we light the candles of our rich and multi-vocal tradition.

## FROM THE ROSH HaYESHIVA

### A Tikkun for Yaakov Rabbi Dov Linzer



Three of Yaakov's sons play a major role in the stories of Yosef and his brothers: Yosef, Reuven, and Yehudah. Each one of these presents a type of a *tikkun* for Yaakov. It starts with Yosef. "These are the generations of Yaakov: Yosef."

This is the Midrash's reading of Bereishit, 37:2, a verse that in its simple sense narrates the events that occurred to Yaakov's children. By putting the period after the word "Yosef," however, the Midrash suggests a different reading, namely that Yosef is the continuation of Yaakov:

Just as Yaakov was born circumcised, so was Yosef born circumcised...

Just as this one's brother hated him, so this one's brothers hated him, just as this one's brother wanted to kill him, so this one's brothers wanted to kill him...

This one was stolen from twice ["I would repay it... stolen by day or stolen by night" (31:39)], and this one was stolen from twice ["For I have certainly been stolen, *gunov gunavti*, from the land of the Hebrews" (40:15)]...

This one was made great by virtue of a dream, and this one was made great by virtue of a dream.

(Breishit Rabbah 84:6)

These parallels are indeed striking, but when we look a little closer, we see that significant differences exist within them.

Let's start with the first comparison: Both Yaakov and Yosef were born circumcised. This, of course, is not in the Biblical verses, but the Midrash understands the verse stating that Yaakov was an *ish tam*, a perfect man, as indicating that he was physically perfect – born with no foreskin – and Yosef is assumed to have been born likewise.

What does being born circumcised signify? It could indicate someone on a particularly high spiritual level,

but should we then infer that Avraham, Yitzchak, Moshe, and all others who required circumcision were on a lower spiritual plane than Yaakov or Yosef? Rather, it is not a question of what level one is at but how one has achieved that level. In one's religious striving, does one engage evil, opposing forces and eventually gain mastery over them, or does one avoid the engagement altogether? In the Midrashic mindset, to be born circumcised is to live a life (or at least to start a life) sheltered from the forces of evil in a protected bubble of purity.

This was certainly the case for Yosef. He lived in his own pure world, unable to tolerate the bad deeds of his brothers but oblivious to what his reporting was doing to breed their enmity against him. He was enraptured by his dreams, by these messages from God, but deaf to his brothers' reactions to his free sharing of these visions. He innocently went to visit his brothers when they were with the sheep, with no clue as to the danger he was putting himself in. This lack of relating to the real world explains how he became a person constantly acted upon – sent to his brothers, stripped, cast in the pit, sold to Egypt, seduced, accused, and cast into prison – a passive person showing almost no initiative of his own. He lived in a world that God controlled, and thus it was meaningless for him to try to direct the events of his life. He certainly had personal fortitude – he had the strength to resist the temptation of Potiphar's wife – but he lacked the initiative to engage the real world unless forced to do so.

Here is where Yaakov is different. It is true that he was removed from the world in the sense that he preferred to avoid conflict. However, he was not oblivious to what was going on in the world, and he was certainly interested in worldly concerns. He very much wanted Esav's right of the first born; he wanted the blessing; he wanted to succeed with Lavan's sheep. But he was not prepared to fight or to argue with Esav or Lavan outright to achieve his goals. Rather, he chose to work around them to get to where he was going.

This isn't non-engagement; it is non-direct engagement. Sometimes this way leads to deceit. Sometimes it also leads to sacrificing one's financial interests. Consider the other point of comparison in the Midrash: Yosef is stolen twice, and Yaakov is stolen from twice. Yosef himself was taken and unjustly acted upon, first by his brothers and then by Potiphar. Yaakov, in contrast, was not himself stolen. It was Lavan's sheep that were stolen, and Yaakov chose to pay Lavan for them regardless of whether the loss was his fault or not. He

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would rather pay Lavan than fight with him about who was right.

This difference plays out in the other parallels as well. Yosef's brothers hated him because of the ways he acted as a result of being oblivious to what was going on in the world. Yaakov's brother hated him because of actions that came from being very aware of the ways of the world, scheming to get what he wanted while keeping his hands clean. Yosef became great due to a dream that he did nothing to realize, that he allowed God to bring about in its due time. Yaakov became great due to a dream, but he acted to ensure its fulfillment by making a deal with God and then reminding God of it when he needed to see it realized.

Yosef's path is undoubtedly the more pure one. But it is not possible for most of us to remove ourselves from this world. Nor is it necessarily wise. Yosef was blessed that God protected him from his brother's revenge and from the dungeon of Potiphar. It would be foolish for us to imagine that we could act with such obliviousness to real world consequences with similar impunity. So while Yosef might represent a partial *tikkun* to Yaakov's approach, it remains only partial. The true *tikkun* is to find a way to engage the world in a straightforward and direct manner.

Yaakov himself made this shift when he fought the mysterious man without running away or looking for some less direct way to fight. The man smote him on the curve of his thigh, at the sciatic nerve, exactly in the location of the genitals. The wounding of this area was a symbolic circumcision. In confronting his adversary, Yaakov was transforming from a person born without a foreskin to becoming a *mahul* – a person who could deal with challenges directly and have the strength to overcome them.

In Yaakov and Yosef, the Torah presents us with two models of a personality that desires to remain *tamim* – disengaged, or engaged but avoiding conflict. The ideal lies elsewhere. And it is thus that we are presented with two other personalities, two brothers who do step up to the plate when problems arise: Reuven and Yehudah.

Both Reuven and Yehudah acted to save Yosef when the brothers were prepared to kill him. Reuven confronted them directly, convincing them to cast Yosef in the pit. He reasoned that the best he could do was persuade the brothers to let Yosef die indirectly, and then to find some way to retrieve Yosef from the pit. This might have been the perfect plan. It required some lack of honesty, but really, how honest must one be when dealing with potential murders? At least he was willing to address them head on. His problem, however,

was lack of follow-through. Reuven is more than ready to rush in to save the day, but he is impetuous: "Turbulent as water, you will not excel" (49:4). He needs to slow down, to plan the next steps, and to see the plan through to the end. This trait continues to be a problem when it comes time to convince Yaakov to send Binyamin down to Egypt, as we will see in the next *parasha*.

Yehudah is the true *tikkun* of Yaakov. Yehudah confronts the problem and sees it through to the end, at least to the greatest degree possible. He convinced the brothers not to let Yosef die but to sell him. He can't control the situation beyond that, but at least he is able to ensure that Yosef's life is saved. Perhaps he could have achieved more; perhaps more courage was needed. That will emerge in the following story with Tamar, where he is also prepared to step up and do the right thing even if it requires great courage in admitting past wrongs. But even now, his approach is the correct one – confront the problem head on, have a plan, see it through. It is this trait that will ensure that the brothers can return to Egypt with Binyamin, and it is this that, coupled with tremendous courage, will ensure Binyamin's release.

There are many ways to deal with our challenges. The goal is not to avoid confronting them as part of a misguided attempt to remain pure. True, Yosef is only a partial *tikkun* of Yaakov. The true model for us must be the one that began with Yaakov's own struggle with the mysterious man and which was fully realized in the person of Yehudah. It is the model of engagement and of courage. It is the model of a leader.

## GUEST D'VAR TORAH

### Joseph's Gratitude

Seth Herstic (YCT '16)

Joseph refuses to surrender to Potiphar's wife's sexual advances despite her persistent efforts. Why won't he submit to her seductions?



Is it because he only craves the closeness of Hashem? Or is it because lust is unholy? Perhaps he won't sleep with her because she isn't an Israelite. Is he worried about the moral sin of adultery? None of these reasons are summoned by Joseph to defend his abstinence. Instead, he argues that to submit to Potiphar's wife would constitute a great violation of trust:

"... He said to his master's wife, 'Look, with me here, my master gives no thought to anything in the house, and all that he owns he has placed in my hands. He wields no more authority in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except yourself, since you are his wife. How then could I do this most wicked thing, and sin before God?'" (Breishit, 39:8-9).

Although violating Potiphar's trust appears to be Joseph's concern, one may also detect in his explanation the issue of *k'fiyut tovah* – ungratefulness or ingratitude. Of course, to misuse or mistreat all that he had been *granted* would be a gross violation of trust on the part of Joseph. But to take the one thing he was *forbidden* would also constitute a display of outrageous ingratitude, since it would mean that all that Potiphar had given Joseph was, in his eyes, insufficient.

What is ingratitude at its essence? It is an attitude that says, "Evaluate your life based on what you lack instead of on what you have. And let what you're missing always overshadow what you've got." The greatest ingrate in Scripture, Haman the wicked, epitomized this attitude. Haman lets the one thing he feels is lacking in his life consume all his blessings. He makes an accounting of his life based on what is missing. Who is Haman in his own eyes? He *isn't* the man who the king has promoted to the highest possible position in the empire or a man of great riches and glory, but simply the man who does *not have* Mordecai's respect. His attitude is antithetical to Joseph's, who looks at all that he has and sees it as overwhelming the little that is missing.

Joseph's appreciation not only stands in sharp contrast to Haman's ingratitude but to that of the primordial couple Adam and Eve as well. Indeed, his attitude of appreciation may be seen as a correction – *tikkun* – of their perspective. Adam and Eve had but one *mitzvah* to keep; God had withheld from them just this one tree. Everything else was theirs to enjoy. But they were ungrateful. They ate from the one tree missing from the garden's menu. And instead of displaying gratitude for Paradise, Adam and Eve decided to focus their attention on what they lacked. Had they displayed the thankfulness of Joseph, they would have never been exiled.

Metaphorically speaking, God's command to Adam and Eve is directed at every Jew. Our Law is made up of many prohibitions and restrictions, but when viewed alongside all that is permitted – alongside all that we may enjoy – it is clear that we *may eat of all the trees of the garden except one*. And so Joseph's answer to Potiphar's wife can be ours. When faced with the temptation to transgress, we may find strength in the thought that our Master has given us so much. He has let us enjoy his world. More than that, He wants us to enjoy it. The only thing God has withheld from us is this *one tree*.

That being the case, is it going too far to say that every act of transgression is necessarily one of ingratitude? And if it is not, then does it matter? Only if one is moved by the idea of gratitude to Hashem. But if one believes that he is deserving of everything and *expects* to be blessed with every good in life simply by being a creature of God, then he cannot possibly feel gratitude or obey God out of a sense of thankfulness.

The educational question then is: How do we teach appreciation? How do we train ourselves and our children to focus on *the good that's there* in our lives and not on *what's missing*? And can we do this without resorting to the clichéd, extreme position that humans are worthless and undeserving of anything, an idea that no longer moves us to greater devotion to Hashem? These are difficult questions and great challenges in *chinuch*, and even if we cannot yet lay out a complete program for teaching thankfulness, the story of Joseph's gratitude is a good place to start.