

Chanukah and the Power of Dedication, by Rabbi Dr. Chaim E. Schertz

[December 28, 2016](#) / [theyulamdan](#)

At the beginning of chapter 8 of the Book of Bamidbar, Moshe informs his brother Aharon that God had commanded Aharon to light and clean the *menorah*. This section of the Torah follows the description of the gifts that were offered by the leaders of all the tribes at the dedication and sanctification of the altar. Utilizing the Midrash, Rashi asks the following question:

“Why is the section of the Torah which deals with the Menorah juxtaposed with the section that declares the gifts of the tribal leaders (*Nesi'im*)? Because when Aharon witnessed the dedication of the *Nesi'im*, he became dejected because he was not included with them, not he and not his tribe. God thus said to him, I swear to you that your offering will be greater than theirs because you will light and clean the *menorah*.”

The Ramban explains why the lighting of the *menorah* is the greater gift. It is based upon another Midrash in which God commands Moshe to tell Aharon, “there is another dedication where there is the lighting of candles and it will be given to Israel through your descendants. This is an occasion of miracles salvation and dedication . . .this is the dedication of the sons of the Hasmoneans. Thus there is this juxtaposition between this section of lighting of the *menorah* and the dedication of the altar. The celebration or observance that we call Chanukah thus has great standing in our tradition. It continues for thousands of years after the destruction of the Temple and is observed and is continued by the Jewish people well into their exile and ultimately their return to the land of Israel. It was ordained by God and directly transmitted to Moshe.

There are several difficulties with this understanding. In addition to being anachronistic for a millennium, the Halachic observance of Chanukah seems to contradict its original intent as stated in the Midrash. Rather than a special gift to Aharon and his children, the Kohanim, it has become a universal observance for all Jews. Every Jewish man and woman is required to participate in the *mitzvah* of lighting the *menorah*. It is to be observed in every home, rather than in a public setting. This is unlike the lighting of the Menorah in the Temple where one *menorah* was lit for the whole community of Israel. It is a *mitzvah* to be performed by all in order to proclaim the miracle of Chanukah to all other Jews and not for non-Jews. It is that universal performance which according to the Talmud made Chanukah, the most beloved of all observances. See (Rosh Hashana 18b)

We are thus required to probe deeper into the nature of the observance and the importance of Chanukah. A key to our understanding is the following Talmudic passage:

“Does God then require the light of the *menorah*? For behold, for the forty years that the Children of Israel wandered in the wilderness, they did not travel, but through the light of God. This however is testimony for all who come into the world that God’s presence, Shechinah, rests upon Israel.” (Shabbat 22b)

The testimony is demonstrated by the Western Candle which stays lit longer than all the other candles. This emulates the miracle of Chanukah in which the small amount of oil which was found by the Maccabees remained lit for far longer than was naturally possible.

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In both cases, the light of the *menorah* in the Temple and the light of the Chanukah *menorah* is symbolic of the presence of God amongst Israel. It was through this primordial light that God started the process of creation. The illumination of light is a symbolic representation of God's presence in the world. This perhaps is best illustrated by the description that the face of Moses was illuminated by a special light when he came down from Mount Sinai

In addition, divine illumination is manifested in the very process through which the human mind understands the nature of God's universe and God's code for human behavior. The people of Israel were chosen by God to have God's *Shechinah* (presence) rest upon them. In turn, it became their obligation and responsibility to dedicate themselves to the revelation of that light to the entire world through the example which they set in ethical and moral behavior, the rejection of idolatry, and the belief in one true God. This is an awesome responsibility. When they succeed, the world becomes a better place. When they fail, the world is subject to great disaster.

This then becomes the gift and consolation which was given to Aharon. His descendants, the Hasmoneans, would be the primary cause for God's *Shechinah* resting upon Israel by establishing the basis for the holiday of Chanukah. That divine light would transform the world. This is the true meaning of Chanukah and the dedication of Israel to its message.