

Parashat Miketz - Shabbat Chanukah, 5773, 2012:

Chanukah: Elevation and Transformation

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya.

We are very fortunate to have clear and accepted texts of our *tefilot* (prayers). As long as a shul follows a specific *nusach* (accepted version) of prayers, its particular geographic location is immaterial. This means that whether I pray *Nusach Ashkenaz* or *Nusach Halab*, for example, it will not matter whether I am in Jerusalem, Israel, Brooklyn, NY, or Deal, NJ. The texts of the *tefilah* will be nearly uniformly the same. We are so comfortable with the standardization of our prayers that we tend to take it for granted. Historically, however, this was not the case. Moreover, like many texts in our tradition, the *siddur* (prayer book) evolved and changed over time. Allow me to present a timely example.

The earliest extant order of Jewish prayers is found in the ninth century work known as the *Seder Rav Amram Gaon*. Rav Amram Gaon lived in Bavel (modern day Iraq) and headed the illustrious Yeshiva of Sura. As such, his collection of *tefilot* is considered very authoritative. In his version of the *Al Hanissim* (In reference to the miracles) of Chanukah, we immediately notice that the phrase “*u'temayim b'yad tahorim*” (“and the impure into the hands of the pure”) is nowhere to be found. Apparently, it was not part of Babylonian Jewish practice to recite this phrase. In addition, it probably was not part of any Jewish community’s *sefer hatefilot* (order of prayers) at that time. By the next

generation of Geonim, however, we find that the great Rav Saadiah ben Yosef Gaon (b. Egypt 882/892, d. Baghdad 942) included “*u'temayim b'yad tahorim*” in his *siddur*. So, too, is it included in the late 11th century Ashkenazi order of prayers known as the *Machzor Vitry*, compiled by one of Rashi's (1040-1105) leading students, Rabbi Simcha ben Samuel of Vitry, France (d. 1105). The final stamp of authority for the inclusion of this phrase was issued by the Rambam (1135-1204) in the *Mishneh Torah*, in his collection of *tefilot* that appear at the end of *Hilchot Tefilah* (the Laws of Prayer).

Now that we have briefly traced the history of the phrase, “*u'temayim b'yad tahorim*,” let us try to understand its meaning. Who exactly were the “impure” that were handed over, with G-d's concealed intervention, into the “hands of the pure?” In addition, what is meant by the term: “the pure?” The “impure” (*temayim*) refers to our most dangerous enemy during the Wars of Chanukah – ourselves. The *temayim* were the radical assimilationists among our own people. They were our internal enemy, who sought to adopt Greek mores and values and eschew the essence and foundation of Judaism. They went so far as to subject themselves to painful operations to remove their *brit milah*, so that they would be able to wrestle nude and be indistinguishable from native-born Greeks. In a word, they rejected the Torah and its laws as antiquated relics of a bygone past that had failed to successfully compete with the glory of Greece. In contrast, the “pure,” i.e. the Maccabees, were a relatively small number of Jewish loyalists who were dedicated to maintaining the glory and integrity of our holy Torah. Thus, the most dangerous war was not the war between the Jewish people and our external enemies – the Syrian-Greeks. Rather, the war that determined the future of our nation was the civil war between the Torah observant (*tahorim*) and the Hellenistic assimilationists (*temayim*, or

mityavnim). The victory of the *tahorim* over the *temayim* is one of the major reasons we exist today.

My rebbi and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as the Rav by his students and followers, understood and analyzed the nature of the victory of the Maccabees over the Jewish-Hellenists in non-militaristic terms. True, the Jewish-Hellenists personified the potential destruction of Judaism. In this sense, they were evil, since they sought to defile our Torah from within our own ranks. Yet, the Rav suggested, one of the true miracles of Chanukah is the concept that it is possible to transform and elevate such evil and change it into a positive force:

One can understand why the passage [of *Al Hanissim*] states, “You delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few.” This refers to the military miracle [against the Syrian-Greeks]. But what is the miracle of delivering the impure into the hands of the pure? In fact, the latter is greater than the military miracle, of delivering the strong into the hands of the weak. It is the miracle of elevating evil. The impure was not destroyed by the pure, but was elevated and became pure. The wicked one, the cruel one, was not annihilated by the righteous one, but he himself became holy.” (Days of Deliverance: *Essays on Purim and Hanukkah*, page 154, brackets and underlining my own)

The Rav’s understanding of the battle for the heart and soul of our people at this time reminds me of a powerful Talmudic passage that appears in *Talmud Bavli, Berachot* 10a. Therein we are allowed a glimpse into the beautiful marital relationship that obtained between the great Mishnaic Sage, Rabbi Meir, and his beloved wife, Beruria. We see, as well, the depth of wisdom and understanding that was Beruria’s hallmark:

There were certain bandits in R’ Meir’s neighborhood and they caused [R’Meir] considerable distress. Once, R’ Meir was praying for mercy regarding them, so that they would die. [R’Meir wanted them to perish immediately so that they would still have a chance at some kind of reward in the World to Come.] His wife, Beruria, said to him: What is your reasoning to pray for their deaths? Because it is written: “Let sinners cease from the earth.” You therefore emulate King David – just as he prayed for the death of sinners, so too do you pray for their deaths. But is it then the word *chotim* that is written in the verse, in which case the verse would refer to sinners? No! [The word] written is

written *chataim*, which refers to that which causes one to sin, i.e. the Evil Inclination. Accordingly, King David is not praying for the death of sinners, but for the end to the Evil Inclination that leads them to sin! And furthermore [said Beruria], go down to the end of the verse that states: “and let the wicked be no more.” ... [Given all of this,] you should rather pray for mercy regarding [these bandits] that they should repent...[and then] the wicked will be no more! [R’Meir] heeded her advice and prayed for mercy regarding [them], and they indeed repented of their wickedness. (Translation, *The Artscroll Talmud* with my emendations)

Once again, this vignette, just like the story of Chanukah, teaches us that evil can be elevated and transformed into a positive force. The bandits in Rabbi Meir’s time became new and better people who added to the greatness of our nation. In addition to all of the standard interpretations of the Chanukah lights, perhaps we need to add this message of hope to our repertoire of understanding: Just like the flames of the candles ascend toward Heaven and purity, so, too, do all Jews have the potential to grow, be transformed, and connect with their hearts and souls to *Avimu she’b’shamayim* (our Father in Heaven). May this time come soon and in our days. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom and Chanukah Sameach!

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*** My **new** audio *shiurim* for Women on *Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik’s** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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