

Shabbat Chanukkah, 5784, 2023:

*V'Al Ha-Nissim*

Rabbi David Etengoff

ה' יעזור וירחם על אחינו, כל בני ישראל בארץ ישראל ובכל חלקי הארץ

Hanukkah and Purim, the two rabbinically based *chagim* of the Jewish calendar, are joyous days of celebration and giving thanks to Hashem. My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, described their similarities in the following manner:

Purim and Hanukkah represent man’s active involvement. There is no prohibition of work. God chose Mordechai, Esther, and the Maccabees not as onlookers but as actors. He demanded from them sacrificial, heroic action. He told them to plan the strategy and execute it. Man is the fulfiller of God’s will. Hence, when triumph was achieved, God willed man to celebrate a day of love and sympathy, a day of sharing and togetherness. Hanukkah and Purim revolve around the merger of the individual with the community, promoting an open, sympathetic existence. (All Rav Soloveitchik quotes are from *Days of Deliverance: Essays on Purim and Hanukkah*, Eli D. Clark, Joel B. Wolowelsky and Reuven Ziegler editors, pages 121-124, brackets my own)

The Rav’s understanding of the parallels that obtain between Hanukkah and Purim stresses that Mordechai, Esther, and the Maccabees were active agents in the salvation of the Jewish people. They engaged in “sacrificial heroic action” based upon their personally conceived strategies and chosen modes of deployment. In this way, they fulfilled Hashem’s will, and “... when triumph was achieved, G-d willed man to celebrate a day of love and sympathy, a day of sharing and togetherness.”

If we carefully examine the *Al Ha-Nissim* prayer of the *siddur* that is recited on both Hanukkah and Purim, however, we immediately find a number of significant disparities regarding their form and content. For example, the text of Hanukkah’s *Al Ha-Nissim* is 92

words in length, whereas Purim's is a mere 52 words. Perhaps, the most direct way to understand this difference is to highlight the essential purpose of the prayer, namely, to tell the stories of Hanukkah and Purim. We must remember that Purim has its own *sefer*, namely, *Megillat Esther* that is included in *Tanach*, wherein its events are extensively narrated over the course of 10 chapters. As such, it does not need an elaborately articulated *Al Ha-Nissim*. Hanukkah's chronicle, however, is not found anywhere in *Tanach*; as such, its "*megillah*" is none other than its extensive *Al Ha-Nissim* formulation.

Rav Soloveitchik focuses on another conceptual difference that obtains between Hanukkah and Purim as illustrated in the *Al Ha-Nissim*:

If you compare the *Al ha-nissim* that we recite on Purim with the *Al ha-nissim* we recite on Hanukkah, you will find an important distinction. In the *Al ha-nissim* of Purim, there is nothing mentioned of Mordechai and Esther's role in the unfolding of the dramatic events about which the Megillah tells us. We know from the Megillah that Mordechai took the initiative and Esther was ready to sacrifice herself. But in the *Al ha-nissim*, the names of Mordechai and Esther are mentioned only as an indication of the period during which the events transpired: "In the days of Mordechai and Esther." It should have said: "And Mordechai cried out, and Esther entered the chamber of the king." (4:1; 5:1)

Herein, the Rav underscores the role of Mordechai and Esther as historical markers instead of historical actors. In fact, Purim's *Al Ha-Nissim* completely de-emphasizes the singular import that human intervention played in bringing about the deliverance of the Jewish people at this moment in history. As the Rav suggests, "Though the Megillah depicts the human role and human action, these are completely ignored in the *Al ha-nissim* of Purim." Thus, we find in Purim's *Al Ha-Nissim*: "But You [Hashem], in your abundant mercy, nullified his counsel [that is, Haman's] and frustrated his intention and caused his design to return upon his own head, and they hanged him and his sons on the gallows."

The Rav points out that the situation is entirely reversed when we read the *Al Ha-Nissim* for Hanukkah, wherein the Maccabees' instrumental role is the point of focus:

You delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous, and the wanton into the hands of the diligent students of Your Torah... Thereafter Your children came into the shrine of Your house, cleansed Your Temple, purified Your sanctuary, kindled the lights in the courts of Your holiness...

Rav Soloveitchik buttresses this line of reasoning by reminding us of the prominent role given the Maccabees in the *Ha-Nerot Hallalu* prayer recited after lighting the *chanukiyah* (menorah): "... [the] miracles and wonders that You performed for our forefathers, by means of Your holy priests [that is, the Maccabees]." The Rambam (1135-1204) echoes this prayer's text in his *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Hanukkah* when he states: "The children of the Hasmonean High Priests overpowered them [the Syrian-Greek legions], and killed them, and saved Israel from them." (3:1) In sum, each of these Hanukkah sources emphasize the Jewish people's role in achieving victory, whereas, as we have seen, in the case of Purim, the deliverance from evil is attributed solely to the Almighty.

What is the underlying reason for this glaring difference between Purim and Hanukkah?

Once again, the Rav offers his illuminating insights:

We learn from this that when the fight is spiritual, G-d invites the Jew to participate. When spiritual survival is at stake, man must take the initiative. Even though man is under the guidance of the Almighty, man takes the initiative, and therefore his role is recorded... Antiochus was interested in destroying the Jews spiritually. When the menace is of a spiritual nature, then the initiative belongs to man. Man engages in the struggle for spiritual survival. For this reason, the Hasmoneans took the initiative, and we remember their efforts when we commemorate their victory on Hanukkah.

In stark contrast, however:

When it is only a question of physical struggle [as in the case of Purim wherein Haman's goal was to murder our people,] G-d acts differently. When there is a physical menace or the threat of physical destruction, G-d uses the human hand as an instrument of His will. He recruits man. He uses human energy, human resources, to implement the plan that He

has devised. But Judaism has said that in this case, the man who is the messenger of G-d should not be credited with the salvation... On Purim we celebrate a physical victory. [Therefore,] in the liturgy we make no mention of Mordechai and Esther's deeds because, if the achievements are in the realm of military conquest and of material nature, victory should be attributed to the Almighty.

As different as Purim and Hanukkah are from one another, we must never forget one essential parallel: Just as the Maccabees took the spiritual initiative and rekindled the lights of the Menorah in the *Beit HaMikdash* so, too, did Hashem bring light to our people on Purim to commemorate the physical salvation He undertook on our behalf. As *Megillat Esther* so powerfully attests: "The Jews had light and joy, and gladness and honor." (*Megillat Esther* 8:16, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Shabbat Shalom and *Chanukkah Sameach!*

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\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav](#)