

At the heart of the celebration of Chanukah is the celebration of a miracle. But which miracle are we celebrating? The obvious answer is the miracle of light, the miracle of the holy oil by which the light of the menorah in the rededicated Temple in Jerusalem lasted eight days instead of one. But a small band of Jews defeating a mighty empire is just as miraculous in its own way and for many Jews in history this was the real miracle to celebrate on Chanukah.

In Jewish thought there are two ways of understanding miracles that correspond with the two miracles that are part of the Chanukah story. One is a public miracle, a miracle in which the laws of nature are broken in a way that points those who see it to the reality of G-d's power. The miracle of lights was such a miracle. But our tradition also proposes another kind of miracle, one in which apparent natural phenomena occur in a way which suggests that events were guided by a higher divine power. The miracle of a small weak group of Jews defeating the mighty Greeks despite all odds could arguably, understood in this way. What is remarkable, considering the central focus on the miracle of lights in our modern way of celebrating Chanukah, is that the special prayer recalling the miracles of Chanukah (Al Hanissim) that is added to the Amidah during Chanukah focusses on the miracle of defeating the Greeks against all odds and not the miracle of light.

Perhaps the reason for this is that, while the miracle of light is beautiful and meaningful, it is somewhat removed from the experience of our daily lives. None of us are likely to experience an obvious supernatural miracle in which the very laws of nature are overturned. But how many of us might experience the possibility of the divine working in our lives? Perhaps all of us have done so even if we don't realize it.

In focusing on the less obvious kind of miracle, the Al Hanissim prayer conveys an important lesson. If miracles are extraordinary events that happens to us, divinely bestowed and entirely out of our control, then we are passive in how we interact with the miraculous and the divine. But if miracles are things that happen in daily life even if we do not see it at the time, then we can and should be more active in how we react to the world around us. This idea reminds us to be more open to the presence of the divine in the world and suggests that we can be an active part of making the miraculous happen in our daily lives.

In the words of Rabbi David Hartman, "What appears as fate, the necessity of a small people subject to an invulnerable empire is revealed as an illusion. The language of the biblical miracle is the Bible's way of undermining the acquiescence of humans to the "way things have to

be.”...Belief in miracles is the basis of the “hope model” of Judaism... (Rabbi David Hartman). When we believe that miracles are all around us, we can believe that there is always hope for the future, and that we can be part of making that hope a reality in the world.

Happy Chanukah!

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