

Chanukah 5776--The Miracle of Empowerment

The Sefat Emet (19th century Poland) makes a very interesting and exciting statement in commenting about the discussion of the Chanukah Lights in the Talmud. He is struggling with the interaction of a philosophical idea and a legal concept. Here are his words:

The candle itself does not have 'holiness', but since it is forbidden to use its light for a practical purpose, and the Jewish People designate these lights for Hashem (G-d), it does not seem possible that there would not be some degree of 'holiness' in them. For truly, in every mitzvah there is indeed 'holiness', but it is sometimes hidden. According to a person's actions and behaviors [in the mitzvah], they are able to separate the physical material from the mitzvah and reveal the intrinsic holiness, and [even] to add to it.

He is basically claiming that there is no intrinsic legal category of 'holy' for the Lights, but rather that through human actions and intentions, we can not only infuse the physical Lights with holiness, but we can actually increase their status. This is incredibly empowering! Chanukah is a time of revealing Light in the midst of darkness, and by extrapolation, the Sefat Emet is teaching us that we can even take this teaching into all of our activities and through our own behavior and intention, elevate and illuminate the physical world!

Let's go one step further along these lines. In the Chanukah story, we know that the Syrian Greeks forbade certain Jewish practices at the time, including the celebration of Shabbat, Circumcision, and Rosh Chodesh--the ritualization of declaring the lunar months in the Jewish calendar. There is a great deal to think about each of these things, but I want to share a particular idea from the Shem MiShmuel (early 20th century Poland) about Rosh Chodesh specifically.

He writes two ideas. The first is that the Greeks were deeply opposed to the Jewish way of fixing the calendar according to witnesses, for effectively, it meant that humans controlled the calendar and by extension, Nature. This was unacceptable to the Greeks who viewed Nature as a constant and untouchable by human hands. How could people possibly impact Nature! The special relationship between the Jews and Nature was abhorrent to the Greeks.

The second idea comes to the core of what Rosh Chodesh represents. The Hebrew word for month--*chodesh*-- is the same word for 'new'. In other words, the Jewish marking of the new calendar month represents much more than tearing a page off of the calendar, rather it represents all of the potential of renewal. Just as the moon disappears and reappears with every month-cycle, there is great possibility for each person to renew him- or herself. Nothing is fixed and determined--it is up to each of us.

And here is where the two ideas come together. Chanukah is about celebrating potential and actualization! We actually make a difference when we take our possible renewal and put it into the world, affecting the status of all that is around us. It is no surprise that many people in Israel light their Chanukah candles outside--we're taking it to the streets to bring Light into the world!

At these times of turmoil and difficult struggles in the world, one thing is certain, Chanukah is a Beacon of Light of joy and empowerment and self-actualization that can guide us through the darkness that may be around us.

Blessings for a truly illuminating Chanukah for you and your loved ones!