



by Ariela Warburg

Ariela Warburg's Bat-Mitzvah Torah Discourse

Halakha 12:

This halakha seems strange: why should a poor person, who subsists on charity, be commanded to borrow money or sell his clothing in order to buy oil or candles for Hanukkah? Why should Hanukkah be regarded as so different and so special compared to other mitzvot?

The answer implied by the Rambam is that Hanukkah is חביבה, very much beloved, and we must be careful in performing the mitzvah because its purpose is to express thanks to Hashem for the נסים He performed for us.

What the Rambam may have in mind is, if we read between the lines, that even the poorest of men should exert himself to perform the mitzvah of Hanukkah because he will thereby learn the lesson of hope: just as Hashem performed miracles for כלל ישראל on Hanukkah, so can He do for me as an individual, and I must therefore never give up hope for a better and more secure future. So, even if it is true that אין סומכין על הנס, we must not rely on a miracle, but we can certainly hope for one! And that hope is worth sacrificing for, even to the extent of selling your garment to buy oil for Hanukkah!

Halakha 13:

Here again we find emphasis on the miraculous nature of Hanukkah. Given a choice between buying wine for Kiddush or oil for a Hanukkah candle, we must choose the oil for Hanukkah--because of the element of the נס that occasioned the celebration of Hanukkah.

Perhaps we can offer an explanation in line of what we said before. The poor man, even if he is a beggar living on the dole, must stretch and buy oil for the Menorah because the miracle of Hanukkah gives him hope in his own personal situation. Similarly, if we have a choice between Kiddush wine and נר חנוכה, we choose the נר חנוכה. We should remember that wine is a sign of joy--אין שמחה אלא בנץ--and while Shabbat is a time to be glad that we can make it holy, nevertheless the joy that comes from hope is even greater! Joy from wine is not as effective as joy that comes from hope for a radical change in our fortunes--which is what a miracle is.

Halakha 14:

This final halakha of the Rambam in his section devoted to the laws of Hanukkah is truly as surprising as it is important.

It is important because it lays down a halakha that reflects the most supreme of Jewish values.

The Rambam presents us with two sets of choices: the Shabbat candle (נר ביתו) versus wine for Kiddush, and the Shabbat candle (נר ביתו) versus נר חנוכה. In each set, the person involved can afford only one, not both. Which must he or she choose? The answer in both cases is: prefer the Shabbat candle (נר ביתו) over the other, whether that other is wine for Kiddush or נר חנוכה.

Here we have Judaism's priority in values. The נר ביתו or נר שבת represents שלום בית, domestic peace--because in the dark you stumble over obstacles and you bump into and hurt each other. So the נר ביתו of Shabbat really symbolizes love and friendship and security in the family, between husband and wife, between parents and children, and amongst the children themselves (an almost impossible feat...). And in each case, we choose שלום בית over the joy of Shabbat as symbolized by wine for קידוש היום and over the hope inspired by the נס חנוכה. Love takes precedence over joy and over hope; the home is more important than the Shabbat or than Hanukkah.

What is so surprising about this halakha codified by the Rambam from the מִסְכֵּת שֶׁבֶת in גִּמְרָא?

The surprise is that the Rambam mentions this in the climax of the very set of הלכות which deals with Hanukkah! As we saw in the two הלכות immediately preceding this one, the Rambam aims to highlight the significance of Hanukkah and the miracle it seeks to proclaim. One would expect the last, climactic halakha to be a rousing affirmation of the נס חנוכה.

Yet--that is not the case! At the conclusion of the laws of Hanukkah, with all its emphasis on how beloved the holiday is, and how it encapsulates hope for a better world, at this very time--"love conquers all," and the Shabbat candle (נר ביתו) takes over from the Kiddush cup and the Hanukkah menorah, symbols of happiness and hope.

This, I believe, is a fitting lesson for my Bat-Mitzvah.

I have had the privilege of growing up in a home where there is a great deal of שמחה--with or without the wine or the Diet-Coke... We are a happy crew, and life is בי"ה a lot of fun in our household, even if we have to work hard at everything we do--whether school or private lessons or music or art or household chores. We kids learn from our parents to be hard-working and always busy--and we enjoy it, even if we grumble sometimes... So we have the symbol of קידוש היום.

We also have the hope and confidence that is symbolized in the נר הנזקה. Mommy and Daddy have always tried to give us confidence in ourselves and they and our school have taught us בטחון in Hashem. We know that just as He did miracles for our ancestors in the original Hanukkah, so does He support us with daily נסים in every aspect of our lives.

But most of all--we all work together. We have a great נר ביתו and we have שלום בית even if my sisters sometimes forget about it...We kids know we have the support of our parents and grandparents, our uncles and aunts, our cousins and teachers and friends. We are very very lucky.

And for all this we are very grateful. I thank my father and mother for all this, and I thank my grandfathers and grandmothers, and all those who have contributed to my life up to this point and, I hope, for all the future.

And most of all, I react the way the Maccabees did at the very first Hanukkah--with שבח והודיה to Hashem for all His kindness and love shown to me.

I hope I will continue to deserve His and your love for years and years to come.