Chanukah is so named because it commemorates the חֲנֻכָּה, the rededication of the Beit HaMikdash, and particularly of the מִזְבֵּח, the altar centerpiece of the Temple which the Greeks had defiled (Maharsha to Shabbat 21b). All dedications are called חֲנֻכָּה, such as חֲנֻכַּת המִזְבֵּח or חֲנֻכַּת הַמִּשְׁכָּן, or in contemporary times when we buy a new home and invite people for a חֲנֻכַּת הַבַּיִת, a dedication ceremony.

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch explains the etymology of the name חֲנֻכָּה as deriving from the same root as the word חֲנוֹך, to educate. Indeed, Rav Hirsch says, it used to be customary to spend time on Chanukah discussing, strategizing and recommitting to the importance of chinuch.

We know Jewish education is important, but what connection does it have to Chanukah that they should share a name?

What Is Chinuch?

The Piaseczno Rebbe, Rav Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, defines chinuch in the introduction to his incredible Chovas HaTalmidim. Based on a Rashi in Bereishit 14:14, he writes, "Chinuch is the initiation of a person or object into the trade or art for which it is destined, as in the education of a youth, the dedication of the altar, or inauguration of a house. The term chinuch is appropriate when referring to an innate talent that a person has for a certain art, or when describing the preparation of a house or object for use. It is a special word with specific definition, and it is used to describe the realization of latent potential inherent in a person or object. If we fail to actualize that potential, it will remain concealed forever. Our mission is to be mechanech, to educate the person so that he will become an accomplished craftsman; to prepare the house so that each room fulfills its intended purpose; or to prepare the instrument so that it performs the function for which it was designed."

According to the Piaseczno, Jewish education and Chanukah share the exact same essence. Both are about dedication, bringing potential into reality, helping a person or a building fulfill the purpose for which it exists, and in both, we bring greater light into the world.

Each Child Is a Flame

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch points out that the basic mitzvah of Chanukah is as the Gemara dictates, נֵר אִישׁ וּבֵיתוֹ, the head of the household lights one candle and fulfills the mitzvah for his wife and children. However, says the Gemara, one does the mitzvah in a mehadrin, enhanced fashion, if נֵר לְכָל אֶחָד וְאֶחָד, each person of the house lights their own.

Rav Hirsch suggests that yes, we can live life נֵר אִישׁ וּבֵיתו, if we light the fire in our own hearts, inspire ourselves and make sure we are warm. But the proper thing to do, the way to accomplish things in a mehadrin fashion, is to make sure each person in the home is a burning flame, to inspire children to burn brightly and illuminate the darkness as well.

Chinuch Never Ends

The Gemara continues: מְהַדְּרִין מִן המְהַדְּרִין is to light additional candles each night. In chinuch, like in Chanukah, you can’t light one candle and think you are done. You can’t teach one lesson, share one value,
take advantage of one moment and then become complacent. Chinuch requires mesiyah v’otzal, to always add on, teach more, share more inspiration, and to continue the conversation of life. Our children never truly graduate from the academy of our homes and they never complete the teachings of their parents.

We must be moshe v’hodo, continue to influence, inspire and motivate them each and every day, never allowing ourselves to feel too tired to transmit a lesson or too exhausted to take advantage of a teachable moment.

On the Way in and on the Way Out

The Gemara continues: רַחַּת תְּחֻפָּה מֶצֶוָה, הלְהַנִּיחָה בְּפֶתַח בֵּיתוֹ מִבַּחוּץ, the proper place for the menorah is just outside of the home. The simple understanding is that this placement will allow for the greatest publicizing of the miracle, which is our ultimate goal.

But there is something deeper. We are told the menorah goes on the left side so it is opposite the mezuzah and we are thus surrounded by mitzvot. It is strange, however, that we would violate our usual rule of giving deference to the right side in order to be surrounded. Why not light the menorah right under the mezuzah and have both on the right? Because right and left aren’t absolute directions; they are relative to one’s perspective.

In truth, both the mezuzah and menorah are on the “right” side of the door. The mezuzah is on the right when one walks into the home. We take the values that the mezuzah represents and stands for and remind ourselves of the unity of Hashem’s existence, about loving Hashem and loving others, and about bringing holiness into our lives as we enter our home.

The menorah is on the right side as we exit our homes and head out into the street. There, we, and our children, will encounter foreign values, outside influences, pressures of assimilation and challenges to our faith. We see the light of the menorah as we head out and remind ourselves of our duty and responsibility to illuminate the world, dispel the darkness, and share the light of Torah.

The Role of the Kitchen Table in Chinuch

The halacha continues that בִּזְמַן סַכָּנָה, the proper place for the menorah is just outside of the home. The simple understanding is that this placement will allow for the greatest publicizing of the miracle, which is our ultimate goal.

Lastly, the purpose of the candles is to illuminate the darkness. When we light the menorah, we reveal what was there all along and simply needed a light to shine on it.

In chinuch, says the Piascezno, we are just revealing what is latent inside the child all along. We illuminate the way for him or her and allow them to break through and become the people they are meant to be.

Michelangelo put it best when he described his process of sculpting: “In every block of marble, I see a statue as plain as though it stood before me, described his process of sculpting: “In every block of marble, I see a statue as plain as though it stood before me, shaped and perfect in attitude and in expression, genuine interest in their lives, sharing of stories and divrei Torah, and a healthy exchange of ideas.

Many studies have shown that drug use among teens is inversely proportional to the number of nights the family has dinner around the table together. Bring your family together, bring the menorah inside and to the table.

Igniting the Flame

The Gemara debates whether נַחֲתוּ וּצְדָקָה מַגְּזַה, or rather to place a lit menorah in the proper location? For example, if I light a menorah in the bathroom but then put it outside my home or on my dining room table, do I fulfill the mitzvah? The Gemara concludes, and the mitzvah is to light, kindle and ignite a flame. This is our duty with chinuch, to light the flame in those around us.

Revealing What Was Inside

I believe that similarly in chinuch, when it is a time of danger in which we are losing children to unhealthy behaviors, lack of spirituality or observance and more, we need to bring them into the home and to our tables. Nothing can substitute for the impact of spending time with our children and doing so around the table with discussion, singing, conversation, genuine interest in their lives, sharing of stories and divrei Torah, and a healthy exchange of ideas.

The fate of the Jews in the diaspora was, and predictably will be, determined by their commitment to Jewish education.

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