



The Three Foundational Mitzvot

In *Al HaNissim*, we say the Greeks sought to “violate the laws of Your will.” This expression shows that the Greeks did not actually fight mitzvah observance, but rather the root of that observance, the Will of G-d.

Hence they decreed a ban against Shabbat, Rosh Chodesh and circumcision: “And Antiochus answered and said unto his ministers... Let us rise upon them, and cut them off from the covenant which was made for them: Shabbat, Rosh Chodesh and *Mila*” (Antiochus 7:11).¹ The Greeks waged war precisely against these three *mitzvot* because they are the root of the Torah.

The Maharal² argues that the first appearance of anything is also the root and purpose of the same thing, and includes everything about that thing. This principle is clearly illustrated in the Torah. The first manifestation of the Torah is in these three *mitzvot*, given even before the Torah was given: the *mitzvah* of circumcision was given to our Avraham Avinu, the *mitzvah* to sanctify the New Moon was given to the Children of Israel in Egypt and the *mitzvah* of Shabbat was given at Marah. All three of these *mitzvot* are the root and purpose of the Torah, and so the Greeks sought to uproot them all.

The Greeks wanted to disconnect Israel from the Torah, for without these foundational *mitzvot*, it is impossible to access its depths. They did not want to destroy the Jews; they wanted to destroy Judaism, the uniqueness of *Am Yisrael*. As the Midrash says,³ “‘darkness’ refers to the Greek exile, which darkened the eyes of Israel with their decrees and would say to them: ‘write on the horn of the bull that you have no part in the G-d of Israel’ and regarding the verse,

“And behold a great terror of darkness fell upon him,”⁴ the Midrash explains⁵ that the Greeks fought against the Torah, determined to cause a rift between the Torah and the people of Israel.

Hence the Maccabean victory over the Greeks was a victory for Torah and *Bnei Torah* over the kingdom of Greece. Chanukah is therefore a holiday of *Bnei Torah*, which is implied in two places:

First, the victory of the *Chashmonaim* is hinted upon in the blessing of Moshe to the tribe of Levi: “Bless, O L-rd, his resources and favor his undertakings. Smite the loins of his foes and enemies so they rise no more.”⁶ Rashi comments: “Moshe saw that the *Chashmonaim* would fight the Greeks, and he prayed for them since they would be few – 12 *Chashmonaim* and Eleazar – against several tens of thousands.” It is well known that Moshe’s blessing to the tribe of Levi is guaranteed to all who set themselves apart from the affairs of the world for the purpose of studying the Torah.

Secondly, it is implied in the Gemara (Shabbat 23b), when it says, “One who is accustomed to kindle lights will be rewarded with children who are Torah scholars.” Rashi explains that lights refer to Shabbat and Chanukah candles.

According to the Rambam: “The precept of lighting the *menorah* is exceedingly precious, and one should carefully observe it to acclaim the miracle, ever praising and thanking G-d for the miracles He has performed for us. Even if one has nothing to eat except what he gets from charity, he should borrow, or sell his



garment, to buy oil and lamps and light them.”⁷

Why does the Rambam consider lighting Chanukah candles a precious *mitzvah*? The Maggid Mishne explains that his source is the above Gemara. In contrast to all the other *mitzvot*, for which we receive our reward in the World to Come, upon lighting the Chanukah candles we receive our reward immediately through our children becoming *talmidei chachamim*. A direct response to the Greeks’ intention to detach *Am Yisrael* from *Torat Yisrael*.

Adapted from “Shiurei HaRav Avraham Shapira on Ketubot and Kiddushin”.

- 1 See also Sfat Emet, Miketz 5662, and Chanukah, 5647 and 5648.
- 2 Netzach Yisrael, 3 and other places.
- 3 Netzach Yisrael, 3 and other places.
- 4 Bereishit 15:12.
- 5 Bereishit Rabbah, 44:17.
- 6 Devarim 33:11.
- 7 Devarim 33:11

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Judaism is about relationships. The Greeks asked, What exists? Jews asked, What is the relationship between the things that exist?

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