



The Children's Holiday

Now there is not much new or brilliant left to be said about the holiday of Chanukah, right? Many old and grizzled rabbis like yours truly would probably agree with that statement. Over 50 years of writing and speaking about Chanukah should pretty much exhaust the topic, shouldn't it? But then again, that would be selling Chanukah short.

There is always a different and new insight that illuminates all the holidays and Chanukah is certainly no exception. I was reminiscing with myself (something that old grizzled rabbis do often) about my own life and past. I was amazed to again realize that somehow a lawyer from Chicago ended up being a Rabbi in Jerusalem. How did this happen? And how did the Jewish State itself happen – not in terms of history, facts, personages, dates, places and wars but in the amazing fact that such a country flourishes and progresses in spite of all odds, past and present, against its existence?

Our Sages have taught us that people to whom wondrous things occur do not really recognize those events as being wondrous. It is part of the weakness of human nature to have such limited understanding. There has to be a flash of insight, a commemorative act, a tradition of being able to look past the trees to the forest, a spirit of almost childlike wonder for the amazing to truly be believable in the eye and mind of the beholder. And I think this is how we have to look at Chanukah and the traditions and customs that so endear this eight-day festival to all of Israel.

Jewish tradition and the Rabbis of the Mishnah took an amazing event that many people would look at as being

ordinary or natural and restored it to its truly wondrous state. The story of Chanukah is that of a small and apparently weak nation overcoming a mighty army of a world empire.

It records a triumph of monotheism and Jewish tradition over pagan culture and practices, of the small, pure lights in the Temple that overcame the flaming torches that were far from pure, and of the vitality and resilience of Israel over those who would wish to snuff it out of existence. It is all wondrous but only if one views it all as being wondrous.



In their holy perspective of Jewish life and events, our Sages elevated the mundane and seemingly ordinary to the realm of miraculous and eternal. That is the main lesson Chanukah teaches us – we are a special people who live a miraculous existence with constant wonder and yet it is all encrusted in seemingly natural and ordinary occurrences.

To de-legitimize the story of Chanukah and to treat it as just another ancient war of the Grecian period is the same tactic the world uses today to de-legitimize the State of Israel and

our rights to our ancient homeland. If the wonder of it all is lost and forfeited then so is our struggle for existence and independence. Chanukah is a pure wonder and hence its importance and relevance to us in today's world.

Perhaps more than other holidays of the Jewish year, Chanukah is a children's holiday. Tradition allows even the youngest to light the Chanukah candles, to play *dreidel*, to taste *latkes* and *sufganiyot*, to have time off from school and to observe the holiday through the eyes and senses of a child.

Children still retain their sense of wonder and imagination. Their world is not usually bound by the practicalities, realism and sometimes pessimism of their elders. Everything in life is still new and unexpected, worthy of curiosity and examination. Theirs is yet a magical world, even a spiritual world, viewed from a different plane of perception and thought.

Therefore, Chanukah is the perfect holiday for children for it requires this perspective – to be made wondrous, miraculous and thereby meaningful and beneficial. Chanukah is not for the jaded and empty-spirited. Its candles flicker only for those that see the fire of Torah, tradition and morality lying beneath the waxy surface.

One who is privileged and able to see the wonder of the events that occurred to us “in those days” will also be able to discern the wonders that we encounter daily here in Israel “in our time.”

Rabbi Berel Wein is Senior Rabbi of Beit Knesset HaNassi in Jerusalem and Director of the Destiny Foundation.

