

Chanukah, Olive Oil & Food

written by Meir Elkabas | December 6, 2020



“You shall eat, be satiated, and bless HaShem your Lord for the good Land (i.e. the Holy Land) which He has given you” (*Devarim* 8:10).

Rav Avira stated ... the Heavenly angels questioned HaShem regarding a seeming contradiction that appears in the Holy Torah: “On the one hand, You wrote, ‘I am a Lord who will not show favor [in judgment]’ (*Devarim* 10:17), but on the other hand, You wrote, ‘HaShem will show favor to you’ (*Bamidbar* 6:26)? The Holy One answered them: “How can I not show favor to the Jewish people? For I have written in the Torah, ‘You shall eat, be satiated, and [then] bless HaShem your Lord,’ and yet they already bless Me even after eating an olive’s worth [approximately 30 grams] and an egg’s worth [approximately 60 grams] [which is much less than their being fully satiated]!” (*Berakhot* 20b).

With this source, Rabbi Meir established the law of reciting a blessing after eating just an olive's worth of food (i.e. 30 grams), while Rabbi Yehudah established the blessing only after eating an egg's worth (i.e. 60 grams). Jewish law follows the opinion of Rabbi Meir – an olive's worth.

Food is what keeps body and soul together. When the act of eating is conducted properly and in balance (i.e. not overeating), it enables a true existence and perspective in life. Thus, an olive's worth (30 grams), even though not at all satisfying, is enough to give the soul productive energy to use in the performance of Mitzvot.

And if, after consuming such a minimal amount of food, one uses this energy to say words of praise and glory to HaShem, it activates the reciprocal praise and glory that HaShem bestows on the Jewish nation. With this, HaShem, as it were, gives Heaven and earth over to their hands so they can guide and direct nature according to their own will – leading to “super-natural” wonders and miracles taking place. This results in people “seeing” the glory and splendor of HaShem hidden within creation, a perspective that comes naturally to those truly living in the Holy Land – the Land of Israel.

(For more insights and development of these ideas, please see *Likutey Moharan*, Lesson #47.)

Based on these ideas, we can acquire a deeper insight into the Chanukah miracle and our celebration of the festival.

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Divine favor generated by all the holy items and devotions performed in the Holy Temple. The Menorah was lit daily by the High Priest using pure and untainted “olive” oil. Olive oil was specifically used to demonstrate that the goal of the Holy Temple is to reveal HaShem’s Divine favor in this mundane world of concealment. This revelation can also be achieved on a personal level by minimizing one’s food intake to even an “olive’s worth,” and then to praise HaShem using this energy.

And it was specifically the High Priest who kindled the olive oil in the Menorah, since the verse “HaShem will show favor to you” (which is mentioned in the Talmudic passage cited above, regarding blessing HaShem even after consuming an “olive’s worth”) is part of the Priestly Blessing (*Bamidbar* 6:26).

However, the Greeks sought to undermine the Jewish people’s ability to reveal and even “control” HaShem’s Divine favor. By passing decrees to prevent the Jews from observing the Shabbat, sanctifying the New Moon, and performing the Mitzvah of circumcision – three practices that reflect the pride and glory of HaShem in His holy nation – the Greeks hoped to throw the Jews into a spiritual “panic.” With this accomplished, they hoped to “stress out” the Jewish nation, which would eventually affect the quality and quantity of their eating, thus blemishing the “olive’s worth” of their sustenance.

Their plan is hinted to in the Hebrew work for Greece – *Yavan* – which is etymologically similar to *Yeven Metzulah* (quicksand). By making the Jews sink into a spiritual “quicksand,” they would cause them to lose control and thus eat whatever and however, resulting in the concealment of HaShem’s Divine favor.

But the Maccabees fought back. Yochanan the High Priest, together with his five sons – all Cohanim/priests – felt it was their responsibility to restore the nation’s ability to activate HaShem’s Divine favor, since they were the ones who blessed the nation with the Priestly Blessing.

This led to the “super-natural” victory of the small Maccabee/Cohanim army over the massive Greek empire. These weren’t your regular trained and armed soldiers. Yochanan and his sons were tzaddikim of the highest caliber, totally immersed in the holiness and service of the Holy Temple. They went out to battle with the blessing of “HaShem will show favor to you” on their lips.

After the Cohanim were victorious and regained full control over the Holy Temple, one of the first things they did was search for a container of pure “olive oil” to rekindle the Menorah. And yes, the next miracle was that they found a container of pure and untainted olive oil sealed with the insignia of the High Priest! Since this was the whole purpose of the Temple – to illuminate the world with Divine favor through Rabbi Meir’s “olive’s worth” – this find was considered a big miracle.

The next miracle was that there was only enough olive oil to light the Menorah for one day, yet the oil burned for a total of eight days. The number 8 corresponds to the eighth Sefirah (spiritual energy from Above) called *Hod* (Glory). For when Divine favor is revealed through “super-natural” miracles, it leads to the revelation of both the glory of HaShem and the glory of the Jewish nation.

Now we can understand why Jewish law states that it is best to use “olive oil” to light the Chanukah candles – i.e. to reveal Rabbi Meir’s “olive’s worth.”

For this reason too, the only thing we are permitted to do with the Chanukah lights is to “look” at them (as opposed to using their light to read a book or illuminate some another activity). This looking is basically “seeing” the revealed glory and splendor of HaShem and the Jewish people, which is re-revealed through the Chanukah festival every year.

In line with all this, we see why the days of Chanukah are

called “days of praise and thanksgiving.” For with the awareness of the “olive’s worth” activated, people become more aware of the quality and quantity of their eating, and as a result properly praise and thank HaShem for the sustenance that He gives us.

For this reason, too, Jewish law states that if words of praise and thanks to HaShem are recited at any meal held during the Chanukah festival, it becomes a Mitzvah to partake of that meal. In other words, the food that is eaten is in the category of Rabbi Meir’s “olive’s worth” of food (even though one actually eats more than 30 grams of food during this meal).

May we truly merit this year to connect to the powerful light and awareness generated by the Chanukah candles, and may we be inspired to enhance the holy quality of our eating, as this is the main means for revealing HaShem’s special love to the Jewish nation. Amen.

SHALOM AND CHANUKAH SAMEACH