The title is taken from the songs our children sing in school, but there is a very deep meaning hidden in them. Our sages attributed the verse “and darkness was on the face of the depths” (Genesis 1:2) to the kingdom of Greece, that darkened the eyes of the Nation of Israel. In our weekly discussion, we will illuminate the light of Chanukah and banish the darkness of Greece.

This week’s lesson will focus on the holiday of Chanukah that we are in the midst of. On the days of Chanukah, we thank G-d,
who stood by us in our time of trouble, giving over the strong into the hands of the weak, and the many into the hands of the few. When the Greeks sought to make the Nation of Israel forget the Torah and stop observing the commandments, a great salvation and deliverance occurred for the Nation of Israel, and the kingship was returned to the Nation of Israel for more than two hundred years until the time of the destruction of the Second Temple.

Rabbi Nachman taught: “The days of Chanukah are days for thanksgiving, as it is written: ‘And they designated eight days of Chanukah for giving thanks and praise,’ etc. And the days of thanksgiving are the aspect of a taste of the World to Come because the essence of a taste of the World to Come is giving praise and exalting His Great Name, may He be blessed, and recognizing Him” (Likutei Moharan II, 2). We will therefore focus on the deep meaning of thanking G-d and its power to overcome the darkness and reveal the light of Chanukah.

The Kingdom of Greece existed as an empire precisely during the middle of the Second Temple period, about two hundred years after the building of the Temple and about two hundred years before its destruction. The Greeks engraved on their banner symbols of their permissive secular culture and consecrated an all-out war against the Torah of Israel and the observance of its commandments. Our sages attribute this to the verse in the Torah describing the beginning of creation: “Now the earth was astonishingly empty, and darkness was on the face of the depths” (Genesis 1:2), referring to the Kingdom of Greece, meaning that the kingdom of Greece symbolizes darkness. What is meant by the words of our sages that Greece symbolizes darkness? Why do the Greeks represent darkness more so than any of the other nations that made the Nation of Israel suffer? And what is the antidote, i.e., the light, which can banish the darkness of Greece?

Rabbi Natan explains at length that the darkness of Greece
applies to every Jew both on the general level and on the personal level. On the general level, the Kingdom of Greece declared a war on spirituality, and those who chose to become Hellenized were not adversely affected. This is, in fact, the greatest darkness, when someone deceives a Jew, whose whole essence is spiritual, into believing that there is meaning to a life where one denies the existence of his Creator and distances himself from the Torah of Israel and its commandments. Living for the pleasure of the moment cannot be compared to Eternal life. For a Jew to give up Eternal life and live for the moment his life is no less than darkness and death.

But there was something else very significant that the Greeks strived for with all their might: they wanted to cause the Nation of Israel to despair. As we noted, the Greek military success came precisely during the middle of the Second Temple period. Our sages knew that the Second Temple was not going to be the final redemption (Yoma 21b). It was known that the Second Temple would be destroyed, and yet G-d had mercy on the Nation of Israel and separated between the exile that took place after the destruction of the First Temple and the exile that took place after the destruction of the Second Temple, by establishing the Second Temple in between them to create a buffer between the two exiles and give the nation breathing space. Yet this is exactly what the Greeks wanted to avoid. They planned to make the destruction happen sooner in order to extend the exile, not leaving any time for a spiritual revival. This is why Greece is considered a deep, bottomless pit that is very difficult to get out of, as King David wrote: Save me from “teet hayavan (the pit of despair)” (the word used here for despair has the same letters as the Hebrew word for Greece, “yavan”) because the whole intention of Greece was to extend the exile indefinitely in order to cause the Nation of Israel to despair so that they would lose hope completely.

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Eternal life. For a Jew to give up Eternal life and live for the moment his life is no less than darkness and death.

The Hashmoneans, however, with their devotion to G-d, aroused G-d’s mercy, and He did not allow the Kingdom of Greece to carry out their plans, as we say in the prayer “Al HaNissim” which is dedicated to the memory of the miracle: “And You in Your abundant mercy, stood by them in their time of distress. You defended their cause; You judged their grievances; You avenged them...and afterwards Your children entered the Holy of Holies of Your Abode, cleaned Your Temple, purified Your Sanctuary, kindled lights in the courtyards of your Sanctuary, and designated these eight days of Chanukah to thank and praise Your great Name.”

And now we can address the personal level. Every person encounters difficulties in his daily life and in life in general. When a person experiences such events, it may seem to him that everything has come against him and “the heavens have come crashing down on him.” This is the time when a person needs to turn inwards and focus on G-d’s kindness that is to be found within everything he is going through, the buffer between each event which is the aspect of the “Second Temple,” the spiritual light and kindness that G-d does with him in every situation, and he should not get carried away by the feeling that everything is bad, as if he were living through a long, exhausting and unending exile.

In fact, there is no such thing as having only troubles, for everyone also has salvations and positive experiences that happen in his life, and yet the tendency is to ignore the good and focus on the difficulties. Every suffering contains within it a salvation and opportunity for spiritual growth. As Rabbi Nachman explains the verse, “in the midst of my distress You comforted me” (Psalms 4:2)—that if a person will search inside himself, he will see that even within the difficulty itself HaKadosh Baruch Hu is enabling him to achieve expanded
consciousness” (Likutei Moharan 141 and 195). When a person carries out a slightly deeper than usual introspection, he will see that, in fact, even within his difficulties, there is concealed a dimension of hidden kindness. This understanding, that G-d sends him attributes of relief in the midst of his troubles, can help him strengthen himself and also help him pray to G-d even while he is struggling with the difficulty, because as soon as a person starts to see all the kindness that G-d does for him even in times of trouble, he will become aware that not everything is black, but that there are also points of light, and this will strengthen him to pray to G-d that He should save him from all his troubles.

And here too, when a person thinks about the kindness that G-d does for him, G-d awakens His abundant mercy and does not let the person’s troubles combine together into one long and difficult exile. Moreover, the more a person worries about his troubles, the more they seem to gang up on him to overcome him, exactly as the Greeks tried to do to us. And so too, the opposite: when a person focuses on the kindness that G-d does for him and he thanks G-d for all the kindness and expanded awareness that he has found within the difficulty, this causes Hashem to send him greater perception and salvation within the difficulty until, in the end, the opposite will occur from that which the Greeks intended and instead of the exiles joining together to become one extra-long exile, the salvations and expansions will join together and become a complete redemption. Just as it will be in the future, all the pleasures of the World to Come will be found in thanking and praising G-d.
Not everything is black, but that there are also points of light...

So too when a person thanks G-d for His kindness and discerns that even within his troubles G-d is helping him every single moment and he does not let himself sink into sorrow and sadness, this in itself is the light of hope which enables him to concentrate better while praying. Before a person recognizes G-d kindness, it is very difficult for him to strengthen himself in prayer because the “darkness” of Greece closes in on him. But when he recognizes and focuses on the kindness that G-d is constantly doing for him, then he will be able to strengthen himself and pray, despite all the difficulties, and thus he will merit a complete salvation.

In order to illustrate these concepts, we will give an example that Rabbi Natan brings regarding King David:

King David, may he rest in peace, was forced to flee from his son Avshalom who had rebelled against him. This was a catastrophic moment. King David has to flee from his own son Avshalom who has rebelled against him and is now pursuing him in order to kill him. King David, as he was fleeing, prayed to G-d to save him. David’s prayer to G-d as he was running away
is recorded in the book of Psalms: “A psalm for David, when he fled from Avshalom his son. O Lord, how have my adversaries multiplied! How many rise up against me. They all say about me, ‘G-d will never save him.’ But You, O Lord, are a shield about me, my glory the One who raises up my head” (Psalms 3:1-4). His outcry expresses immense fear and pain. Our sages ask how it is possible that the opening words of the cry, are a “psalm” (“mizmor”) of David. Wouldn’t it seem more fitting to open the prayer with the words a “lament” (“kinah”) of David, since King David was surely in actual danger of losing his life? Our sages respond that David saw a good point in the fact that his son Avshalom was the one pursuing him and not one of his servants, since usually a son has pity on his father, and there was hope that he would not kill him.

Yet even so, the continuation of the psalm is entirely filled with his pleading and suffering. So, if indeed King David was able to discern that he had a chance of being saved, why did he continue to cry out? Rabbi Natan explains: King David was in an utterly tragic situation being pursued by his own son. He had no hope whatsoever. In such a situation, it was incredibly difficult to pray and beg for salvation, but King David still managed to perceive the point of light within the anguish and darkness. Having discovered the point of light in his situation—that G-d was constantly beside him—that in and of itself enabled him to pray and plead with G-d to save him, even though he was still in the greatest danger. This is why King David opens with the words “A Psalm for David,” precisely because he had recognized this positive point, he now had the clarity and the hope to be able to pray to be saved from his son who was chasing after him. Indeed, the continuation of the psalm expresses immense pain. David was crying from the depths of his heart for G-d to save him. And G-d did indeed save him.

This is the message of Chanukah: to always search for the aspect of kindness that is to be found within the difficulty to discover the positive point, the respite that is to be
found within trouble itself. And then we can look more deeply, and we will see that not everything is going against us all at once. The heavens are not falling down on us. In such a way, we can encourage and strengthen ourselves to pray to G-d to save us, and in the meantime, we can continue to do whatever we can: pray, study, and do good deeds. And thus, we will merit to the final redemption, may it come soon.

Happy Chanukah!

(According to Likutei Halachot, Kilai Behama 4, 8-9).